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Test on p54

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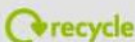
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Media
player
group test,
p84

WELCOME

Emerging blinking from the stygian gloom of the Tech
Labs into the gloriously illuminated upper levels of
Future Towers, I'm thrilled to be taking the helm of the
good ship *Home Cinema Choice* at a time
when there's so much exciting stuff going on.



This month we're putting 3DTV on the back burner while we
concentrate on technologies that might arguably have a bigger
long-term impact, including free-to-air HD and networking.
Turn to page 50 for our look at the Sony KDL-40EX503, one
of the UK's first Freeview HD TVs, which also features some
revolutionary internet features. Or, if you prefer your media
players to be tiny and black, we have a group test of them (p84).

Elsewhere, we celebrate the **joys of stonking great
surround sound speaker systems** with Teufel's

System 8 (p80), and the wonders of Epson's projector
technology with its flagship EH-TW5500 (p60).

All this, and the chance to win £5,000 of AV gear chosen for
World Cup enjoyment. The fun kicks off on page 26!

Chris Jenkins
Editor

TEAM HCC

Rik Henderson:
Dep Ed Rik has worked on
tech mags and videogames
TV shows for two decades



Steve May:
HCC's Editor-in-Chief has a
stunning 20+ years as a CE
journo on his clock



Anton van Beek:
News Ed Anton began his
pro-videophile career over
11 years ago



Chris Jenkins:
Our ISF-calibrated Editor
used to run Future's Tech
Laboratories



Mark Craven:
HCC's Production Editor can
write shorthand – he can't
read it, though



John Rook:
Art Editor John first worked
on HCC back in 1999, when
TVs were made of wood



MENU

Win!
£5k of AV
gear for the
World Cup
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With the World Cup fast approaching, we put together the best soccer-centric home cinema system possible on a budget of just £5,000, and then give you the chance to win it!

TECH LABS

Our guarantee to you:

Equipment reviewed in *Home Cinema Choice* is measured and quantified by Future Tech Labs, which for more than 15 years has set the standard for independent AV test & measurement. The findings of the Tech Labs are used to underpin the subjective opinions of our Reviews team, ensuring that you receive the best possible advice when it comes to planning your next purchase



CO-STARRING

This issue's team of expert writers are the best qualified in the business

Martin Pipe:
Technology specialist
Martin co-developed HCC's
Tech Lab operation



Adam Rayner:
The UK's foremost expert in
extreme audio writes about
bass, hi-fi and cartoons



Richard Stevenson:
Industry veteran and former
Editor of UK CE trade
journal ERT



Alvin Gold:
One of the UK's most
experienced and respected
hi-fi and audio experts



Barry Fox:
A veteran commentator on
consumer electronics in
mags such as *New Scientist*



Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor
of *What Video & TV* and
What Home Cinema



PLAYBACK

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101 Paranormal Activity (BD)

The Men Who Stare at Goats (BD)

The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus (BD)

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Give 'Em Hell Malone (DVD)

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Eye-catching spherical 5.1 speaker system

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Highly-specified Full HD projector proves LCD isn't just a budget technology

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The Japanese giant goes upmarket with this super-slim 32in monitor

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Networkable Freeview+ PVR with BBC iPlayer and multimedia playback

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Blu-ray soundbar hits the right notes

74 LG N2B1 DD2 NAS

World's first NAS box/Blu-ray burner

76 MK Sound S150 THX Ultra

Breathtakingly dynamic speaker system

80 Teufel System 8 THX Ultra2

Roomshaking THX-approved 5.1 package

84 Think outside the box

We put six of the best media players through their paces in our latest group test...

Western Digital WDTV V.2;
Iomega ScreenPlay Director HD
AC Ryan PlayOn! HD Mini
Eminent hdMEDIA Stream
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Subscribe!

Save money on the world's best AV mag and get a TechLink Switch2 4-into-1 HDMI switch box worth £80!



The image shows five Eclipse TD speakers. Two are small, spherical satellite speakers hanging from above. Three are larger, spherical subwoofers standing on a reflective surface. All speakers have a black, glossy finish and a prominent white circular driver in the center. The background is dark, and the speakers are reflected on the surface they are standing on.

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BULLETIN

→ **News highlights** **NEXT-GEN TIVO** The legendary PVR returns **INFOCUS** New Full HD projector with interchangeable skins **XBOX MOTION CONTROL** Hands on with Microsoft's innovative Project Natal **LG LAUNCHES 3DTV** But passive shutter screens dropped from consumer range **PICK 'N' MIX** WWE wrestler Ted DiBiase picks his five favourite films

Double your hi-def

Panasonic TX-P42G20B → www.panasonic.co.uk



If you're struggling to decide which of the two free-to-air hi-def services suits you best, then check out this stylish new 42in plasma from Panasonic, the first to feature both Freesat HD and Freeview HD tuners. Available now for around £1,250, the high-spec THX-certified NeoPDP model also packs 600Hz Sub-field Drive picture processing and enhanced Viera Cast networking including Skype and Acetrax video-on-demand.

HCC Online...

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Chameleon cinema

InFocus ScreenPlay 8602 → www.infocus.com

InFocus has introduced a new 1080p projector to its ScreenPlay range, the £3,000 SP8602. The highlights include Texas Instruments' DarkChip technology with BrilliantColor, Pixelworks' DNX 10bit video processing, a claimed 30,000:1 contrast ratio and images up to 300in. But we also love the interchangeable 'skins' that let you match the SP8602 to your décor.



Partner with...

Onkyo HT-S6305

Home cinema receiver/
speaker package £500 approx

Onkyo's new receiver/speaker package looks to offer serious performance at a tempting price. The heart of the system is the new TX-SR508, a 7.1-channel AV receiver with 192kHz/24bit Burr Brown DACs, 32bit DSP chips, Audyssey DSX mode, 3D video compatibility (via a quartet of HDMI 1.4 inputs) and lossless audio decoding. Also included in the £500 system is the company's gloss-black finished HTP-638 5.1-channel speaker system (with wall-mountable satellites) and a iPhone/iPod dock.

www.onkyo.co.uk



Pick a pigment



Matching your loudspeakers to your living room can be a bit problematic when all that's available is a choice of black and a couple of faux-wood finishes. Enter Meridian Audio, which is now offering a bespoke colour service dubbed Meridian Select to customers worldwide. Meridian Select uses the popular RAL Classic colour reference standard to offer a vast choice of colours on all its lacquered DSP loudspeakers and 800 Series hardware components. Production time is six weeks, and products retail for, on average, 15 per cent above the current RRP.

LG gets Active



Citing 'increasing interest in 3D across the nation', LG Electronics has confirmed that it will be releasing its active shutter Full HD 3DTVs and 3D Blu-ray player in the UK this May. 'We've seen such enormous interest from consumers around 3DTV that we choose to bring the LX9900 televisions to the shelves ahead of schedule, to meet the demand' said an LG spokesperson. The LX9900 will be available in 47- and 55in iterations. Interestingly, the passive shutter tech LD920, used in Sky's trial 3D football broadcasts, has been withdrawn from the brand's consumer range.

Reference redux



Loudspeaker specialist Acoustic Energy claims its forthcoming Reference ONE and Reference TWO speakers bring 'a wealth of new technology and cutting-edge engineering' to its iconic series.

The result of two years of research and development, these all-new speakers employ under-hung drivers with massive magnets, unique self-damping cabinets and DXT tweeter technology.

The Reference ONE launches in Spring with the Reference TWO following in Summer, priced £1,500 per pair and £2,000 per pair respectively.

TiVo unveils Premiere range

And a glimpse into Virgin Media's set-top box future

TiVo has announced its Premiere personal video recorder range in the US, showcasing many of the features that could be part of the next generation of Virgin Media boxes later in the year.

The latest TiVo PVRs are all about putting multiple sources of content together into one simple interface, bringing the best of video-on-demand and IPTV into the same interface as television programs.

The two Premiere cable boxes have twin tuners and an Ethernet port, and output HDMI, component video, composite video, optical audio or analogue audio.

Video output modes range from 480i right up to 1080p and, although both boxes use the same user interface, the TiVo Premiere XL brings THX-certified audio and a backlit remote control as standard, as well as significantly increased storage of 1TB over the basic box's 350GB.

'It has never been this easy to get all your entertainment in one place, on the big screen, in HD, right at your fingertips,' said TiVo's CEO Tom Rogers.

'And the beauty of TiVo Premiere is that finding what to watch is just as fun as the watching the TV shows themselves. TiVo Premiere is your new cable box, it's your movie box, it's your web box and music box; it's the one box that can give



TiVo's Jim Denny says it's trying to merge linear TV and on-demand content

you access to almost anything you want, whenever you want it.'

'We're trying to bridge traditional cable and the arrival of broadband video-on-demand,' added TiVo's Product Marketing VP Jim Denny.

In practical terms this means a more central role for search, allowing people to easily find their favourite shows, regardless of whether that is through internet-based services like Amazon Video On Demand, Netflix and Blockbuster On Demand, or through the linear cable service.

Of course, the much-vaunted TiVo recommendation engine is present and accounted for, allowing you to grade your programmes and allow your box to record what it believes you will like, as well as providing recommendations based on what other fans of a particular show are grading highly.

Although Virgin Media has not confirmed what features we can expect to make the jump from the TiVo hardware to the next generation of its cable STB, much of the Adobe Flash-based user interface is highly likely to be included.



Playlist...

Team HCC reveals its Playback picks of the last month

1 Caprica: Season One (Sky One HD)

Sporadically brilliant, this uneven and unconventional fantasy yarn is slowly winning me over. And Cylons always look great in hi-def! SM



2 Doctor Who: Timelash (R2 DVD)



Vintage 1985 so-bad-it's-good Who, with rubber monsters, bondage, HG Wells, and a scenery-munching Colin Baker. CJ

3 Lost: Season Six (Sky One HD)



After watching the confusing mess of *Lost*'s latter seasons, I'm duty bound to watch the last. Thankfully, it's the best and tightest series since the first. RH

4 Heavy Rain (PS3)



Flawed and buggy it might be, but David Cage's 'interactive drama' remains a fascinating experiment in merging the worlds of films and videogames. AvB

5 Sex and the City: The Movie (R2 DVD)



Not as sharp or pacy as the series, but it needed re-watching before the sequel arrives in May. MC

Pick'n'mix

WWE wrestler and actor Ted DiBiase Jr. picks his five favourite DVDs.....



1 Cinderella Man

'I'm a big Russell Crowe fan and the story was just incredible.'

2 Braveheart

'Mel Gibson's historical epic is a great man's man movie.'

3 The Die Hard series

'If I could hang out with any actor just for a day, it would be Bruce Willis.'

4 The Goonies

'This was my favourite film when I was growing up.'

5 Tombstone

'My all-time favourite movie. If I get a chance to star in another movie, I would love for it to be a Western.'

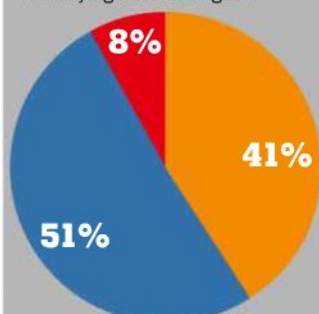
Third-generation professional wrestler Theodore Marvin 'Ted' DiBiase, Jr. makes his acting debut as the star of *The Marine 2*, available on DVD from April 19, courtesy of 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

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We asked...

Would having access to Freeview HD persuade you to ditch your existing Pay TV supplier?

- No – it's no match for Sky or Virgin's
- Yes, I only need a few main channels in hi-def
- I'm not bothered about Freeview HD and don't plan on buying new kit to get it



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Game on with Project Natal

Xbox motion control system points to a future without handsets

In a few months, the way you can interact with your home entertainment will change dramatically. Microsoft's Project Natal, for the Xbox 360, brings voice- and facial-recognition to the games console, along with an innovative gesture control system that dispenses with the notion of a traditional controller altogether.

HCC was invited to an exclusive hands-on with an early version of the technology and discovered that it offers more than just novel gameplay.

Microsoft is planning a firmware update that will make the entire Xbox 360 Dashboard navigable using Natal technology. You'll be able to swish through the Dash to find your favourite movie download or music track and then verbally instruct the console to play it – without ever needing to pick up a control pad.

'Project Natal is meant to be more than just a game,' explains Erin Hofto, one of Microsoft's Xbox Global Consumer Communications team. 'It's a larger part of the Xbox experience.

You'll be able to navigate the Dashboard, browse your movies and so on. Those that are comfortable with the controllers can stick with them. But if, for you, the controller is a barrier, we're giving you a revolutionary new way to use the Xbox 360.'

This seemingly unglamorous aspect of Natal is in fact a real game-changer. For the first time users will get to experience a voice- and gesture-controlled home entertainment system. Not only will it change the perception of games consoles going forward, it could also fundamentally alter the way people



'Project Natal is meant to be more than just a game' says Microsoft's Erin Hofto

interact with their technology. 'People say "Oh it's *Minority Report*", but we don't require you to have a huge glove on,' adds Hofto. 'It's a more consumer-friendly approach. It's hi-tech, but you're not even aware you're using it.'

Whole new bat and ball game

Project Natal, which will be released worldwide in time for Christmas, is shaping up to be Microsoft's best weapon in its fight against both the PS3 and the Wii, and creates new opportunities for casual gaming. To demonstrate the system, a bat and ball exercise called *Ricochet* is offered. What's immediately apparent is just how precise the tracking is – your onscreen avatar authentically mirrors your movement as you jump around in front of the sensor.

The innovation is made possible by a sensor bar that sits below the TV and connects to the console. This comprises an RGB camera, depth sensor and array microphone, all fairly off-the-shelf components. The magic, explains Hofto, is the proprietary software layer that sits over the top. 'Project Natal came out of a lot of Microsoft research. The deep tech behind this has been going on for years.'

So, if you think Natal is just a gimmick, think again.



Xbox 360: Soon to have voice and face recognition

Double dip



The BFI has revealed that it will be introducing Dual Format Edition releases, featuring both Blu-ray and DVD copies of films, on 25 selected titles throughout the coming year. The scheme kicks off on April 26 with the release of two classics from Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo Story* and *Early Summer*, priced £20 each. 'The idea is to provide film lovers with the ultimate win-win solution in a time of financial uncertainty and technological confusion,' says the BFI.

Ninja assassins!



There's nothing the HCC team likes more than ninjas. Except maybe assassins. So can you imagine how excited we are about the upcoming release of director James McTeigue's gory, martial arts-packed action epic *Ninja Assassin*? The film will be cutting a bloody swathe onto DVD, Blu-ray, On-Demand and Digital Download in the UK on May 17, courtesy of Warner Home Video. The DVD version also offers some deleted scenes, while the Blu-ray adds a trio of featurettes.

Vamps on Blu



Fed up with those brooding teen vampires that seem to be popping up in films everywhere these days? Same here. Which is why we can't wait to indulge in another season of the violence-drenched hit HBO series *True Blood*, which gives adult viewers some vamp fun to enjoy. HBO Video is bringing the wonderfully saucy *True Blood: The Complete Second Season* to DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on May 17, both as five-disc sets accompanied by commentaries, featurettes and 'more'.

BD Day

Avatar → 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment → R2 DVD & Region B Blu-ray (2D)

Fox has finally confirmed its sci-fi smash Avatar will make its debut on barebones DVD and 2D Blu-ray in the UK on April 26. Film producer Jon Landau says that the extras have been ditched to give 'the best picture and sound possible'. Exclusive to the UK is a Limited Edition Blu-ray, available for pre-order only by online retailers, with steelbook packaging, four lenticular art cards and a Survival Guide book.



Loewe does audio, too

But the German manufacturer thinks you might not have noticed

Designer brand Loewe is famous for its eye-catching TVs, both in terms of looks and price. So much so that the German marque has embarked on a charm offensive to remind consumers that it also offers serious-grade audio solutions.

HCC was invited to a product showcase at the brand's Harrods concession to find out from Kevin Kelly, MD of Loewe UK, just what the brand believes it can offer home cinema fans in an increasingly crowded market.

First of all, is audio a new departure for Loewe? Not at all, we were told. Said Kelly: 'We've been into audio for years, but peoples' awareness is not as high as it should be. We have multiroom [products] and high-end speakers as well as the more lifestyle products. We are... a one-stop shop for customers who are looking at all solutions.'

Reference point

The high-end audio side of Loewe is best witnessed in its electrostatic speakers (pictured), the Reference Stand Speakers. Chrome finished, with gold-plated terminals and standing over a metre tall, they are designed to partner the Loewe Reference TV and Reference Sound Subwoofer to create a 3.1 or 5.1 surround system, that, it's claimed, is as equally at home with classical music and gung-ho action flick soundtracks. These electrostatics join the Individual line of speakers already in Loewe's product lineup.

An obvious question, then, is whether Loewe is muscling in on established high-end audio brands. Kelly's answer is diplomatic. 'The UK has many world-class audio companies like Linn, Naim and B&W and we would never be head-to-head with them. We try and deliver a high standard, yet in a way that the customer wants to live with.'

Nor will it be offering any KEF Reference-style £40K super-system. 'We know our customer types



Centre point: Loewe's Reference TV provides the centre speaker in a surround setup



Loewe's MD Kevin Kelly says the brand is a 'one-stop shop' for consumers

and we know that they are selecting our product through its excellence,' said the Loewe MD, but we'll not be making any speaker that'll cost much more than £3,000 a pair.'

The first foray into better audio for typical Loewe customers is, as you might expect, the brand's soundbar product, the Loewe Individual Sound Projector, which uses 42 individual mini drivers to create a pseudo surround effect.

'One of those and a subwoofer and many people are happy with the discrete 5.1,' reveals Kelly. 'Above that we go modular but the voicing of the TV speakers is as carefully audio-engineered as the other speakers the sets may be used with. We have expanded audio from TV sound to create a market for Loewe 5.1 audio solutions and now we are trying to increase the specialist, performance nature of our loudspeakers. That's why we have gone into electrostatics.'

Wall of TV



SmartWall-AV is a fully equipped, free-standing piece of luxury AV furniture featuring two Full HD

TVs mounted near the top, and a 60in screen below behind a sliding door – allowing you to watch three separate feeds simultaneously! Other optional features include web browsing, email, movies/music on-demand, integrated L/C/R speakers and 980W of sound amplification. The unit takes around three days to install and will set you back around £40,000 for the basic package, including the four-metre wide cabinet, tech and kit rack. Visit www.smartwall.tv for more info.

Perfect Harmony



Logitech has added two new entry-level models to its range of Harmony universal remote controls, each

of which is capable of replacing up to five other remotes.

The Harmony 600 and 650, priced around £50 and £70 respectively, both use the company's simple computer-based setup and feature a one-click 'activity' button that automatically turns on the right devices and selects the correct inputs. The key difference between the two new remotes is that the 600 features a monochrome backlit display, while the 650 opts for a snazzier colour version.

Buffalo stance



Wireless network solution and storage specialist Buffalo Technology has entered into a

partnership with Panasonic to release a USB Hard Disk Drive storage system for the latter's Viera plasma and LCD TVs. Compatible with the VT20, V20 and G20 series plasmas and V20, D28 (over 32in), D25 and G20 series LCDs, the new JustStore HD-EU2 is available in 500GB and 1TB incarnations and attaches via the screens' USB ports. It can also be used for recording TV programmes directly.

Prices for the storage device start from around £60.

Two become one



Fancy getting a Blu-ray player and Freeview HD PVR, but don't know which one to buy first? Well,

Samsung has an intriguing solution in the form of a piece of kit that fuses the two together. The BD-C8200M features a Profile 2.0 BD-spinner, complete with Samsung's Internet@TV functionality, built-in Wi-Fi, and 1GB of local storage for BD-Live applications. Built into the same sexy-looking black/chrome chassis is a Freeview HD tuner and 250GB HDD. However, you cannot archive material to Blu-ray. Pricing for the BD-C8200M, and a larger 500GB model, is still to be confirmed.

This month's top ten news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



Cameron will have to wait for Avatar 3D

1 No Avatar for Christmas
When will *Avatar* hit Blu-ray in 3D? While director James Cameron still hopes it will appear later this year, Fox has issued a statement saying that '3D is in the conceptual stage' and it won't release the title in 2010. Adding more confusion is the rumour that Samsung has offered 'serious money' to get the exclusive rights to eventually bundle the title with its 3D hardware, something that wouldn't go over well with Panasonic, which has repeatedly used the film to promote its own 3D tech.

2 Monster mash
On a related note, Samsung has confirmed that it has a one-year exclusivity deal to bundle copies of the 3D BD version of *Monsters Vs Aliens* with its kit. The company has also got the exclusive rights to the *Shrek* 3D film series over a similar time period.

3 Hi-def avalanche
Virgin Media is on a bit of a roll at the moment when it comes to adding new HD channels to its TV service. Following the recent launch of Eurosport HD, ITV HD and Syfy HD, the company has revealed that it will also be broadcasting Film 4 HD and E4 HD this Summer.

4 Godfather of projectors
Projector specialist SIM2 Multimedia has revealed that Francis Ford Coppola will feature in a global marketing campaign this year. 'I have owned many projectors in my life. SIM2 is now in both my studios and my home,' says the *Godfather* helmer.

5 UK finally gets the picture
The British Video Association is claiming that its 'What are you waiting for?' Blu-ray ad campaign that ran on TV in the UK over

Christmas hit the right note with viewers. Research indicates that nine million consumers recalled the ad, with nearly 65 per cent now feeling BD picture quality is better than DVD. Well, it's a start.

6 Pole position
Virgin Media has begun testing the use of telegraph poles to deliver 50Mbps broadband and cable TV in the Berkshire village of Woolhampton. According to Virgin Media CEO Neil Berkett, 'This unique trial will allow us to understand the possibilities of aerial deployment... this could, in some cases, significantly improve the viability of delivering next-gen digital services to rural communities.'

7 My eyes are standard-def!
For a survey of 3,000 people commissioned by Sky HD, two per cent of respondents (that's 60 people) claimed that you need to be born with HD Ready eyesight to view hi-def content...

8 Studios sign up to PS3
There will soon be more HD movies available for download via the PS3's PlayStation Network, now that Sony has signed a deal with all six major studios (20th Century Fox, Walt Disney, Paramount, Sony Pictures, Universal and Warner Brothers) to provide flicks to the console. Due to launch in the UK 'soon', the new titles have already gone live in the US, costing around \$6 to rent and \$20 to own.

9 Sell! Sell! Sell!
Samsung definitely has big ambitions for 3D TV. Yoon Boo-keun, head of the Korean tech giant's visual display division, claims that 'the 3D TV segment will be the main battleground for Samsung this year,' and predicted that the company will sell two million 3D sets during 2010, and as many as 10 million in 2011.

Bling TV:
The PrestigeHD Supreme Rose Edition



10 World's priciest TV
Got a spare £1.5million? If so, Liverpool jeweller Stuart Hughes has the TV for you. The base and outer frame of the 55in screen consist of 28kg of solid 18 carat rose gold, the outer frame is adorned with 72 1 carat diamonds; and the inner screen layer is finished in, erm, hand-sewn alligator skin. But you'll have to be fast, as only three will ever be made.

Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Rome lives!



When HBO's celebrated, but costly, historical drama *Rome* was cancelled after just two seasons, fans assumed that it was the end of the adventures of Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo. But maybe not – creator Bruno Heller has confirmed he's written a script continuing their story to be made into a feature film.

Insert coin

Warner Bros is in talks to buy the movie rights to the 1978 arcade classic *Space Invaders* – a game with no plot at all beyond shooting aliens as they slowly make their way down the screen. We can't wait.

Money Never Sleeps...

... it just gets delayed for five months. Originally due for a cinema release this April, 20th Century Fox has revealed that it is delaying *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* until late September to give director Oliver Stone time to polish the film – and show it on the Summer movie festival circuit.

The return of the King



Hot on the heels of his re-imagining of Sherlock Holmes, Brit director Guy Ritchie has now been linked to a reworking of *King Arthur*, to be written by John 'Trainspotting' Hodge and based on Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

'It's a walk-off!'

Ben Stiller has confirmed that he's 'in the process of getting a script written' for a sequel to his cult 2001 comedy hit *Zoolander*, telling MTV that, 'It's in the early stages, but it's gonna happen'.



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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson curls up on his red sofa to nominate the stellar soundtracks that slipped beneath the radar at the Oscars

I'm bleary-eyed having been up half the night masochistically stomaching the Oscars. To a film fan it's important, but requires sitting through five hours of American pomp, pretence and wobbly bottom lip acceptance speeches to find out the winners before tomorrow's papers arrive. The podium held no great surprises, of course, although I raised an eyebrow at *The Hurt Locker* winning Best Sound Mixing and Best Sound Editing over *Star Trek*. In the cinema where I saw *The Hurt Locker* the characters sounded like they were gargling scallops. I watched *Star Trek* at home on Blu-ray and it sounded awesome.

With a panel of US-born Academy judges, Cameron's *Avatar* didn't stand a chance against a film about American soldiers being heroes in Iraq. Yeah *Avatar* is just *Dances With Wolves* in fantasy setting and is more predictable than *Titanic* (it sank, really?), but *Avatar*'s visual feast and score make for cracking cinema.

Goat got

But what really gets my goat about the Oscars is the lack of appreciation of the overall sound of a film. Yes, we have Best Original Score, Best Original Song and awards for Sound Editing and Sound Mixing, but not an all-encompassing gong for the Best Sound. An award that celebrates the way a film's score integrates with the screenplay, the FX, the ambience and the dialogue to create an aural masterpiece as important as the action.

Our Baftas have it right and divide audio awards into Best Music and Best Sound, although even this has only been since 2007 and 2008 respectively. Before that, sound didn't even feature. The last round of Baftas also saw *The Hurt Locker* take top honours for Best Sound but, like the Oscar for Best Mixing, you are unlikely to hear about it. These categories never get into the mass media. George Lucas was right when he said that sound was 50 per cent of the film, and that is

why *Star Wars* and pretty much every movie touched by his hand has sounded incredible.

So if the Academy doesn't do a Best Sound award, maybe we should. Given that this is a new award we better include a few oldies in the nominations too. So how about the eerie and haunting *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (Tan Dun/Yo Yo Ma), the epic *The Return of the King* (Howard Shore) and The Who's *Quadrophenia* for its articulate capture of a place and time. For the perfect song in every scene *Pulp Fiction* would be on top of the pile and for defining a whole genre of movies in a few notes Elmer Bernstein's theme to *The Magnificent Seven* takes some beating. For gauging the essence of gritty film noir Vangelis would get my nod for *Blade Runner*, for sheer pace and colour to match the screenplay, it would have to be *Fifth Element*, and for making me blub like a girl it would be the incredible sound and score of *Last of the Mohicans* (Randy Edelman). As a wild card outsider, I would throw in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as its mix of a classical score and silence is so dumb-foundingly poignant.

Top of my gong list for Best Sound of all time would be *The Empire Strikes Back*. While there's no song in it

you could sing in the shower, John Williams' Wagnerian score and George Lucas' superbly engineered effects are a heavenly aural feast. The dialogue, score, effects, ambience, clarity and mixing, combine to form something much greater than the sum of the parts. If I ever tire of that film it will be time to turn off my amplifiers and subwoofers for the very last time.

But what of the 2010 Academy Awards? Summing up all the nominees from the Academy's four sound categories, which film would have won Best Sound category had there been one? *Star Trek* by a country mile ■

For more of Richard Stevenson's great ideas log on to www.homecinemachoice.com/points_of_view

Richard Stevenson wonders when the award for Most Inappropriate Ponytail on a Middle-Aged Man will finally come his way...



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DVD ADDICT

Worryingly, **The Beek** has had an epiphany. The last time this happened he bought himself a Sega Dreamcast

My recent rant about getting hold of review discs from certain studios (*HCC* #180 for new readers and those with short-term memory problems), got me thinking about the very nature of the coverage that we give to software in these pages – and what I believe we should be offering to you, our wonderful readers.

You see, my education, prior to entering the real world via the medium of print journalism, was in the fine art of Film Criticism. Which is all to do with the academic application of psychoanalytic readings to movies; the explorations of subtexts, metatexts, *mise-en-scène* and all that high-falutin' stuff. And I still believe this is the primary purpose of any film critic. They should analyse and contextualise a film, rather than just acting like a rent-a-quote hack dishing out soundbites, like 'the most explosive movie you'll see all year', in the hope of seeing their name on a movie poster.

You'll be glad to know that I don't think serious film criticism of this kind has any place in *HCC*. We don't want to start boring you to death with, for instance, a painstaking analysis of how **Revenge of the Sith was a critique of the war in Iraq and the dismantling of democratic principles in the US**. But should there be any commentary at all on the quality of the film itself in any of our software reviews?

A wild stab in the dark

The enjoyment of a film is all down to taste, and that's not something you can measure in any meaningful empirical way, or second guess. Hell, I might get all hoity-toity about some movies, but that doesn't mean that I don't like '80s slashers like *Friday the 13th: Part III*. Similarly, someone reading this article must have enjoyed *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* – presumably

because you're the kind of person who likes watching slo-mo shots of young women bending over accompanied by explosions in your surround speakers and in your trouser department. But who are we to say who is right or wrong in their personal taste?

When it comes to the main hardware side of this mag it's much easier. *HCC* has spent millions of pounds (well, a few quid, certainly) and thousands of hours (a few wet afternoons at least) on building up a serious bank of technical gizmos and doohickeys that can be hooked up to a new TV or amplifier and provide you with cold hard facts about what they're actually capable of doing. Each reviewer has his own subjective opinion to add, but it's all backed up by SCIENCE – which, as well all know, is never ever wrong.

However, despite putting the hours in, we've been unable to do the same to measure the quality of a film. So, when it comes to reviewing DVDs and Blu-rays that contain films or shows you have probably already seen, and already have your own opinion about, does it matter what our personal taste is? Could you care less whether we gave *Transformers 2* one-out-of-five for the film?

My solution to this is very simple: we stop passing judgement on the film/show at all. This means we can get rid of the scoring grade for this aspect (honestly, what the hell does three-out-of-five for a film really mean?) and spend all of our time telling you about what you really want to know – how the transfer measures up, whether or not they've bugged up the audio, and if any of the hundreds of extras clogging up the disc are actually worth wasting your time with.

Is The Beek right? Or do you want to know the personal movie tastes of Team HCC? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.co.uk

Anton van Beek actually does believe *Revenge of the Sith* was a critique of the war in Iraq. And we just thought it was an advert for toys. D'oh!





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TECH TANTRUM

Like some sort of technological mole, **Barry Fox** continues to burrow deep into the controversy surrounding 3D Blu-rays and lossless hi-res audio

A while ago, HCC blew the whistle and warned that existing AV amplifiers and receivers will fall over when used with new 3D Blu-ray players and 3DTVs. With one notable exception – Panasonic – the industry has been shamefully slow to pick up on this.

The HDMI standard for 3D connection, version 1.4, was set in May 2009, and lets a 3D player, game or satellite receiver send control signals to a 3DTV set. Broadcasters complained that they had not been consulted so – on the eve of Christmas – HDMI set a modified v1.4 standard, unofficially known as v1.4a. This should let a new Full HD 3DTV set with HDMI v1.4 connectors self-adjust to whatever 2D or 3D Blu-ray movie, game or broadcast it is fed.

The problem is that existing AVRs only have v1.3 connectors and won't be able to pass the v1.4 control codes through to a TV. At best the TV will have to be manually adjusted, sometimes between different sequences of the same movie, game or broadcast. At worst the TV will default to 2D. If the AVR is bypassed and the 3D signal fed direct to the 3D TV, high-resolution audio will be lost – although HDMI v1.4 has an audio 'return path', which lets a TV send digital audio back to an AV amp, the quality is limited to bog-standard Dolby or DTS over coaxial or optical.

So, will v1.3 AVRs be upgradeable to v1.4? It looks unlikely. I talked to Steve Venuti, who heads up the HDMI Licensing Organisation in California, and his admission was: 'A lot of issues are device-dependent and we don't know enough yet. So we have sent an engineer to Japan to talk to manufacturers.'

Halfway house

To preserve compatibility with existing HD receivers, broadcast 3D from stations like Sky will send only 'half-resolution' HD to each eye. The left

and right images are squeezed, usually side-by-side, into an ordinary picture frame. So, with a bit of luck, most existing HDMI v1.3 AVRs will pass a broadcast 3D signal to a 3DTV without problems.

Venuti explains: 'The AVR doesn't know it's a L/R 3D signal, doesn't understand and doesn't care. The TV may have to be set up manually, but we think that most v1.3 AVRs can be firmware-upgraded to let them understand when a broadcast signal is 3D.'

'But the Blu-ray situation is completely different,' he warns. 'BD 3D packs two Full HD frames into a single picture frame that is much bigger than an ordinary BD picture frame. The video and audio data stream will be completely different. AVRs won't be able to recognise what comes out of the 3D player. They won't have seen anything like it before. **They won't understand the data structure and they won't know what to do with it. They'll have no clue.**'

Adds Venuti: 'Some AVRs will be upgradeable. Some not. It will depend on their hardware. We just don't know which ones yet... It's a new frontier and I never knew there could be so many arrows on a frontier. It's all happening so quickly.'

Panasonic's elegant solution to this mess is to fit its new 3D Blu-ray player with two separate HDMI outputs, one v1.4 for video to a 3DTV, and one v1.3 for audio to an existing new AVR.

So I asked Sony how its new BD player, with only one HDMI output, can be used with an existing AVR. The absurd answer I got was: 'Consumers will need to use an amplifier that has a 3D pass built-in, in order to view 3D content via the Blu-ray player.'

Pardon me? How many existing AVRs will have a button marked '3D pass'? It makes me wonder what Sony's been smoking... ●

Are you confused by the changing HDMI specifications? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.co.uk

This current version of **Barry Fox** is still the 1.3 model. We'll be firmware-updating Barry to the new 1.4 spec in the near future



Tech diary

The world of AV and film changes fast. **HCC's calendar** is here to make sure you don't miss out

Call girl:
The sci-fi thriller *The Box* hits DVD and BD on April 19

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
				9 Whip it Drew Barrymore directs and stars alongside Ellen Page in this tale of a girl who gets a new lease of life taking up the sport roller derby. It skates into your local cinema today APR www.foxsearchlight.com/whipit		
12 The Descent Part 2 Horror heads underground again, when this sequel about a subterranean world of flesh-eating monsters makes its debut UK DVD and Blu-ray debut this Monday www.thedescent2.co.uk		14 Cemetery Junction Co-written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, could this coming of age comedy set in '70s England finally give the comedian the box office hit he's chasing? Find out when it hits UK cinemas today		16 Cop Out Fanboy favourite Kevin Smith tries his hand at directing a film written by somebody else with this foul-mouthed buddy movie starring Bruce Willis and Tracey Morgan. At UK cinemas from this Friday www.copoutmovie.com		18 PALME & Install Middle East The region's only trade event dedicated to professional AV, smart homes and system integration runs from now until April 20 at the Dubai International Exhibition Centre www.palme-middleeast.com
19 The Box Today sees the UK DVD and BD release of this Richard 'Donnie Darko' Kelly-written and directed sci-fi thriller based on a short story by Richard Matheson. Could it be another cult hit? www.thebox-movie.com	20 Happy Birthday! TV presenter-turned-glamour model-turned-actress Carmen Electra turns 38 today. Congratulations Carmen... but please, please stop making those awful movie spoofs	21 Royal succession On this day in 1509, Henry VIII ascended the English throne following the death of his father, Henry VII. So why not mark the occasion by revisiting the first three seasons of the superb historical romp <i>The Tudors</i> on Blu-ray	22 East End Film Festival/10 This showcase for new talent and home-grown films enters its tenth year, hoping to 'inspire a new generation of filmmakers and audiences... and raise the profile of London's East End' www.eastendfilmfestival.com	23 HCC awards It's the biggest date in the AV calendar, as the industry comes together in central London to find out which cutting-edge kit will receive a coveted Home Cinema Choice Best Buy Award 2010 www.homecinemachoice.com	24 Centurion Opening on the same day as the HCC Awards take place, we'll all be rushing to the local cinema this Saturday to this brilliant-sounding Roman-era homage to the classic '70s flick <i>The Warriors</i>	25 The Dark Knight On this date in 1939, DC Comics published the landmark #27 of <i>Detective Comics</i> – now famous for marking the debut of popular superhero Batman
26 Saving Private Ryan Steven Spielberg's WW2 epic thunders onto Blu-ray this month, accompanied by a thunderous DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix and a host of extras	27 Connections Europe Tech specialists from across the continent will head to Amsterdam today for this executive summit on the latest research trends in digital living www.connectionseurope.com		29 RIP Today marks the 20th anniversary of the death of legendary English filmmaker and producer Alfred Hitchcock. The pioneering director behind the likes of <i>Psycho</i> and <i>Vertigo</i> passed away from kidney failure at the age of 80	30 Iron Man 2 The first <i>Iron Man</i> film was a perfect mix of action, characterisation and humour – so we've no reason to expect anything less from this sequel. HCC will be first in line when it hits UK cinemas today www.ironmanmovie.com		
			6 HCC #182 Your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands this Thursday, packed to the gills with tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews MAY www.homecinemachoice.com			

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The **art** of high-end authoring

Steve May visits a Blu-ray authoring house with audiophile DNA, and a growing predilection for 3D

While most of us will strive to buy and build the best possible AV systems we can, to squeeze 'what the director intended' from our movie collection, we probably don't give too much thought to the disc authors responsible for our media. There's an assumption that all authoring is much of a muchness. However, that's far from the truth. Innovation and inspiration abounds if you know where to look.

Over the past year, *HCC* has visited Panasonic's own Hollywood Labs operation in Los Angeles (responsible for developing the MVC codec now being used to produce 3D Blu-ray movies) and taken an in-depth look at the restoration work done on titles as diverse as *Woodstock* and *Dad's Army* (*HCC* #171), and *The Red Shoes* (*HCC* #173).

More recently, we went behind the scenes at Q-Tec, an authoring house that takes a reassuringly audiophile approach to authoring.

Q-Tec bills itself as 'Japan's leading post-production house' and is quite unlike any other facility we've visited. It's adopted for its replication hardware the same philosophy that high-end AV

companies apply to their playback components. Q-Tec's boffins believe that if you build the best hardware, you'll be rewarded with the best reproduction – and it all stems from a lengthy relationship with local neighbours Pioneer and the sonic extremists at audiophile subsidiary TAD.

Home cinephiles with long memories will recall that in the heyday of LaserDisc, Pioneer ran its own software label. And at the heart of its Laser Disc Corporation (LDC) operation was what has become Q-Tec. The days of Pioneer LaserDisc are obviously now long gone, but **the AV-centric hardware ethic it inherited from Pioneer still runs through Q-Tec's post-production DNA**; which is why, for Japanese movie studios, it's become the place to go for restoration and conversion services.

A: Shiho Inazawa from Q-Tec, Japan's leading post-production house

B: FORS stands for Faithful Original Signal, an audiophile approach to disc authoring **C:** Every FORS unit is over-engineered for perfect signal integrity

D: As *HCC* visited, another Kurosawa classic was running through the system

E: Q-Tec is pioneering 2D to 3D conversion





FORS: heavyweight hardware

I visited Q-Tec's studio facility in Akasaka, Tokyo, and discovered it has instigated a unique approach to post-production and restoration, using original technology dubbed Faithful Original Signal (or FORS for short).

'The audio quality of video media is not always good,' Shiho Inazawa, Q-Tec's media solution manager, told me. 'So we researched why that may be the case and, with the help of Pioneer's engineers, discovered evidence of deterioration of the digital audio waveform when conventional authoring equipment is used. So we developed FORS – it's designed to maximise the audio potential of movies and music released on Blu-ray.'

Over-engineered to an astonishing degree, FORS' digital signal processors are packed with high-grade components. Proprietary sound processors and audio-video encoders are used to optimise the original digital signal, and banks of them are used to process material for BD release. Most recently, the system has been entrusted with bringing the back-catalogue of legendary Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa to Blu-ray. Other high-grade restoration work is ongoing.

Q-Tec's facility is a veritable playground for video editing geeks. Its suites bristle with Quantel editing systems and familiar names from the creative community, including Autodesk and AVID. But for all that, it's Q-Tec's own hardware which is most fascinating.



'We share the same philosophy as TAD,' Inazawa explains. 'We embrace the approach of the high-end audio equipment maker, from telecine to encoding. All our system components are upgraded to be the best available. FORS' main aim is simply to reproduce the audio exactly as it appears on the original master.'

To demonstrate the fidelity that is achievable, Q-Tec plays sequences from live classical recordings made by NHK. The result sends chills down the spine.

Creating a 3D world

But Q-Tec isn't just about high-fidelity audio. Increasingly, its engineers are becoming preoccupied with 3D. In the last two years, the company opened both 3D grading and viewing rooms equipped with a variety of projection/evaluation gear.

Quantel iQ and Pablo systems with stereoscopic extras feed into one of two NEC Digital Cinema projectors, firing through a RealD Z-screen polarizing filter at a Harkness Silver Screen. Standard RealD polarising glasses are used to view the material. A flick of a switch and the Silver Screen goes up and a Stewart white screen comes out of hiding. The RealD Z-screen is moved out of the light path of the projectors and is replaced with an XpanD system, which uses an IR transmitter to sync frame sequential video (3D Blu-ray style) with Active Shutter glasses.

The cutting edge of Q-Tec's 3D work revolves around 2D-to-3D conversions, using tools developed with partners Mercury Inc. While some TVs are coming to market with on-the-fly 2D-to-3D, I've yet to see a convincing implementation. For a real 2D conversion, skill and processing power in equal measure are required.

I'm shown an action sequence from an anime release in 3D. It's dynamic and exciting on the big screen, with plenty of out-of-frame 3D moments. The sequence then plays again, in original 'flat-o-vision'. It's remarkable how staid it looks in comparison, but I'm told that this 2D version is how it was originally conceived and shot.

There's an irony to what Q-Tec is doing: expending great energy in creating authoring systems designed to squeeze the absolute best from source material, and then simultaneously pioneering 2D-to-3D conversions of existing movie and TV material – essentially a modern update on the colourization fad that swept across old black-and-white titles a while back.

But as I'm shown yet more demo material – and again become awestruck by the dimensionalisation achieved – it makes me wonder. Both dramatic and subtle in equal measure, the work indicates that years of classic movie material could be heading for a new lease of life in 3D. Before visiting Q-Tec that prospect would probably have made me shudder. Now, I'm conflicted. How could something so wrong feel so right? ●



Birthday boy: 2010 is the 100th anniversary of legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, so what better time to reissue his rich and influential back-catalogue in hi-def on Blu-ray?



Faithful: A Japanese Blu-ray set of Kurosawa classics went through the FORS system. 'We long for a chance to use FORS on some UK origin projects, too,' says Inazawa

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Are you
ready
for the

big
kick
off?

With the World Cup fast approaching, we gave fervent footy-fan **Rik Henderson** a budget of £5,000 to put together the best soccer-centric home cinema system. This is what he came up with...

For many, the FIFA World Cup simply equates to a bunch of sweaty blokes kicking the bejeezus out of a solitary pig's gut (or plastic equivalent) for an entire Summer month. There's little respite, with football matches taking pride of place on the Beeb and ITV nigh-on every night. Indeed, for many soccer-abstainees – and the Scottish – it's positively ghastly.

However, for the rest of us, it's a jolly jamboree. A time when all football fans can stand side-by-side with one voice, screeching at the top of their lungs, 'come on [insert nation of choice]' and 'the referee is a student of onanism'. It's a time of great celebration (until the quarter-finals, anyway). And what better way to celebrate than to watch it in style at home with a few mates.

Certainly, home AV technology has moved on leaps and bounds since the last event in Germany, as have filming techniques and broadcast formats. The action may have been shot in

high-definition in 2006, but only Virgin Media (then ntl Telewest) customers, or those on the limited HD trials, were beneficiaries.

This time, though, the entire country can watch the whole shebang in hi-def, via BBC HD and ITV HD on a multitude of free and paid-for TV platforms. And, with Dolby Digital surround, it'll sound great, to boot. Now all you need is a system that makes the most of it, an entire home cinema finely-tuned specifically to enjoy the footy festivities.

That would be a simple exercise given limitless funds, but I've been tasked to put one together on a mere £5,000 budget, and instructed to keep things on a realistic and sensible level. 'A whole home cinema system for five-grand?' you might cry. So did I. However, I've actually managed to come up with an outstanding package. And almost on budget...



PROJECTOR & SCREEN

Why settle for just a TV when it comes to bigscreen football action? True home cinema means projector and screen and if you've got your friends around, you don't want them clambering over each other to see the matches on a tiddly telly. Adding a PJ and decent-sized screen to the setup is an obvious decision.

Convenience is clearly important. This system has to be suitable for most living rooms, so I favour the pull-down variety, one that can be mounted on the ceiling for occasional use. Mounting the projector, however, may be out of the question, and bringing it out for specific matches and other events could be the only option. A short-throw lens, then, is a must – it can be placed on a coffee table.

Considering the options, my choices for both pieces of kit come from the same manufacturer, Optoma, and are, specifically, the HD20 Full HD projector and DS-9084PMG+ pull-down screen.

The HD20 represents amazing value at £900 – I could easily have blown my entire budget on a 1080p projector alone. It has an extremely impressive array of features, including a 16:9 Full HD DLP chipset, six-segment colourwheel, two HDMI v1.3 inputs, and an HCC Tech Labs-tested contrast ratio of over 1,000:1 (which is impressive for under a grand). It also



has a Bright mode so that you can get a decent picture with a fair amount of ambient light – ideal for World Cup parties.

Most importantly, the HD20 has the aforementioned short-throw lens. In fact, one of its caveats is its inability to focus from a great distance, so it'll need to be placed closer to the screen anyway. Job's a good'un.

The screen of choice is the company's £120 Panoview DS-9084PMG+, an 84in 16:9 matte white platter perfectly suited to a veritable footy feast. It features a manual pull-down system with Selflock and controlled screen return. And with a Gain of 1.0, it will ensure that the green grass is exactly that.

Dream screen: While it would've been possible to find an unfurled fixed screen for the budget, Optoma's pull-down Panoview DS-9084PMG+ is better suited for a living room environment

Near sighted: Its short-throw lens affords the Optoma HD20 [left] great portability





LED Boots: The Samsung UE32C6530's 100Hz Motion Plus processing makes footy action move smoothly



GAME ON
The official World Cup videogame is on its way

TV

Of course, you won't want to wheel the projector out every time there's a match on, and catching up on the highlights and other ancillary shows on an 84in display would be a tad excessive. Therefore, a TV is a must for a complete system. And while I could've plumped for second best – a cheap(ish) LCD TV, for instance – I've taken into consideration that this specific piece of kit will be the heart of the system for a long time after the final whistle...

Now, as the tournament isn't being broadcast in 3D, a 3DTV won't be necessary. That's why I've chosen Samsung's UE32C6530, which features the company's amazing side-firing LED backlight (as seen on the

40C7000 series we reviewed last issue). And while there's no 3D, this 32in set does, however, come with a features list as long as Peter Crouch's arm, including the manufacturer's proprietary and impressive app system, Internet@TV. It's also as slim as they come, with a mere 27mm waistline, so it's ideal for wall-mounting behind the projection screen's drop zone.

Lastly, it comes with 100Hz Motion Plus technology, ensuring that the sports action is super smooth. At £900, it doesn't come cheap, especially for a 32incher, but it's a great indulgence that I just couldn't resist.

Be 3D-ready: Samsung's BD-C6900 is futureproofed with its 3D-capabilities



DIGITAL TV RECEIVER

With FIFA's tournament being shown in high-definition, you won't want to stick with a generic Freeview tuner, and while the Samsung TV has a Freeview HD tuner in it as standard, the projector most certainly doesn't. You will need a source for Full HD football craziness, and they don't currently come better than Humax's HD-Fox T2.

It may be pricey for a set-top box, costing £180, but remember that you won't need to take out a subscription to Sky+HD or Virgin Media's V+HD service. Admittedly, those platforms offer a far greater choice of HD content, but as it's just the World Cup that we care about here, the box's ability to play both BBC HD and ITV HD is all that's important.

The HD-Fox T2 also has other talents, such as media streaming over a home network (wired via its Ethernet port), so you can also feed it footage of World Cups gone by.

BLU-RAY PLAYER

You may wonder why a Blu-ray player is even included in this system. After all, it won't be needed when the matches are on. But the true fan won't be satisfied with just the TV coverage, they'll require non-stop goal action, and with *All The Goals of Germany 2006* available on Blu-ray, that's exactly what they can have. Undoubtedly, this tournament will also be BD-bound, so you can reminisce over every wince-worthy tackle.

Also, let's face it, a home cinema wouldn't be a home cinema without a disc-spinner. And by choosing Samsung's BD-C6900, I reckon I'm onto a winner. It stretches my budget slightly with its £350 price tag, but is as futureproof as they come. You see, I may not have plumped for a 3DTV, but I have decided to throw a 3D BD deck into the mix.

The BD-C6900 is capable of playing standard Blu-rays and DVDs, obviously, but it's also compatible with a whole host of different video formats, such as HD MKV and XviD files. It is also a capable media streamer, and features in-built Wi-Fi to hook up to your home network with the minimum of fuss. It's the 3D functionality that is clearly its most tantalising feature, though, and I thought I'd treat this system to a head start on what is, potentially, the next evolution for AV.





SPEAKER PACKAGE

The many talents of the Onkyo AV receiver (featured right) make it easier to find a speaker package to suit. We're restricted by price somewhat, but that doesn't mean we should expect anything less than excellence.

That's why KEF turns my head, and specifically the company's long-standing, superbly-detailed 'egg' speakers. Thankfully, the specialist has an entire home theatre system that is made up of its superb HTS3001SE satellites, centre and 250W subwoofer, so it makes the composition of the package easy to settle on. Also, you can buy the sats separately, so I've added two of them to provide the extra fronts needed for the height channels of Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, or extra width of Audyssey DSX.

With those taken into account, the cost for this set stands at £1,500 – a bargain considering the amount of definition and clarity the system is capable of, and the aesthetics of the surrounds. They'll certainly please the wife, even if the month of unexpurgated football action doesn't...

AV RECEIVER

Choosing an AV receiver is one of the hardest jobs. It shouldn't be too expensive, for fear of blowing the budget too wide, but should be no slouch either. HD visuals may be of great import, but the sonics should match and, indeed, give an overall impression of being at the tournament itself. In short, it needs to have an all-round, bombastic performance for a sensible price.

Up steps Onkyo, with its £1,000 TX-NR1007. A lighter sibling of the high-end 3007 and 5007 receivers reviewed in HCC recently, the 9.2-channel 1007 still packs in THX Ultra2 Plus-certification, ISF-calibration controls, video upscaling to 1080p (which will upconvert the 1080i HD broadcasts better than the Humax's onboard chipset), six HDMI v1.3a inputs, two HDMI outs, and a quoted power of 180W per channel.

But the main reason I've chosen it for this World Cup-inspired setup is its on-board Audyssey DSX and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz decoding. Both of these audio formats utilise extra front channels, creating a greater facing soundstage and, therefore, blasting you and your friends with a cacophony of emotion. Woof!



The final whistle

So that's it! In conclusion, this is the complete setup I've put together (in alphabetical order):

Humax HD-Fox T2 Freeview HD receiver – £180 (approx)

KEF KHT3005SE + 2x extra satellites 7.1 speaker package – £1,500 (approx)

Onkyo TX-NR1007 AV receiver – £1,000 (approx)

Optoma DS-9084PMG+ pull-down projection screen – £120 (approx)

Optoma HD20 1080p projector – £900 (approx)

Samsung BD-C6900 3D Blu-ray player – £350 (approx)

Samsung UE32C6530 LED TV – £900 (approx)

Xbox 360 Elite games console – £190 (approx)

Official FIFA World Cup 2010 South Africa game – £50 (approx)

Some system, I'm sure you'll agree, and each piece of kit complements another. There's only one problem, I've gone horribly over budget... £190 over budget, in fact.

I could cut some corners to be under £5,000, such as not adding the extra satellites to the KEF speaker package, or by choosing a cheaper TV or AV receiver, but that would be to the detriment of performance. However, my escape route is that these are prices quoted by the manufacturers, and you're more than likely to find many of the items discounted on the 'net or in the high street. Plus, I've managed to put together an entire fully-fledged home cinema system for the cost of a Premium Economy return flight ticket to South Africa, hotel accommodation for the month, and entry to the World Cup Final – not including beers. I think I deserve to be cut some slack.

GAMES CONSOLE

Finally, I've decided to add a games console to the mix. While the system would be complete without one, Electronic Arts is to release the official FIFA World Cup 2010 South Africa game, and this system has a Full HD projector with an 84in screen begging to be covered with top extracurricular activity.

The console of choice is an Xbox 360 Elite. Blu-ray playing duties are handled elsewhere, so a PlayStation 3 isn't specifically needed, and I'm happy to be an HD snob in this instance, so an SD Wii is out of the question. Any true gamer will also tell you that Microsoft's machine is



number one for pure games-playing, so that's good enough for me.

EA's game, too, promises to be the best of the software company's FIFA-licensed series yet. And seeing as this franchise has overtaken Pro-Evolution Soccer as the number one football gaming experience, both critically and in sales, you can be sure that the version for this year's World Cup will hit every right note ●

GET THE LOT
Turn the page for our amazing competition to win it all...



Competition

Now you can win the lot!



**Over
£5k
worth
of kit**

It's the ideal home cinema for watching the World Cup and thanks to Electronic Arts (for the console and game), Humax, KEF, Onkyo, Optoma and Samsung, you can win the lot just in time for the big kick off.

Yep, this entire custom-created home cinema system, worth £5,190, could be yours if you answer the following question. The first correct entry drawn after the closing date will win its author the whole shebang. That's a 32in LED TV, 3D Blu-ray deck, 1080p projector, pull-down screen, 9.2 THX-certified AV receiver, 7.1 speaker package, Freeview HD set-top box, and an Xbox 360 Elite console with the official World Cup game to play on it. Phew!

Which nation has won the FIFA World Cup the most often?

- A:** Germany
- B:** Italy
- C:** Brazil
- D:** Argentina

Now text **HCCFOOTY**, space and your answer **A, B, C, or D** (ie **HCCFOOTY B** if you think Italy) followed by your name and address to **87474** for a chance to win. Texts cost 50p plus your standard network tariff. The closing date for entries is 15/05/10. To enter for free, visit www.futurecomps.co.uk/hccfooty

The small print: By taking part in a Competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futuretcs.com. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

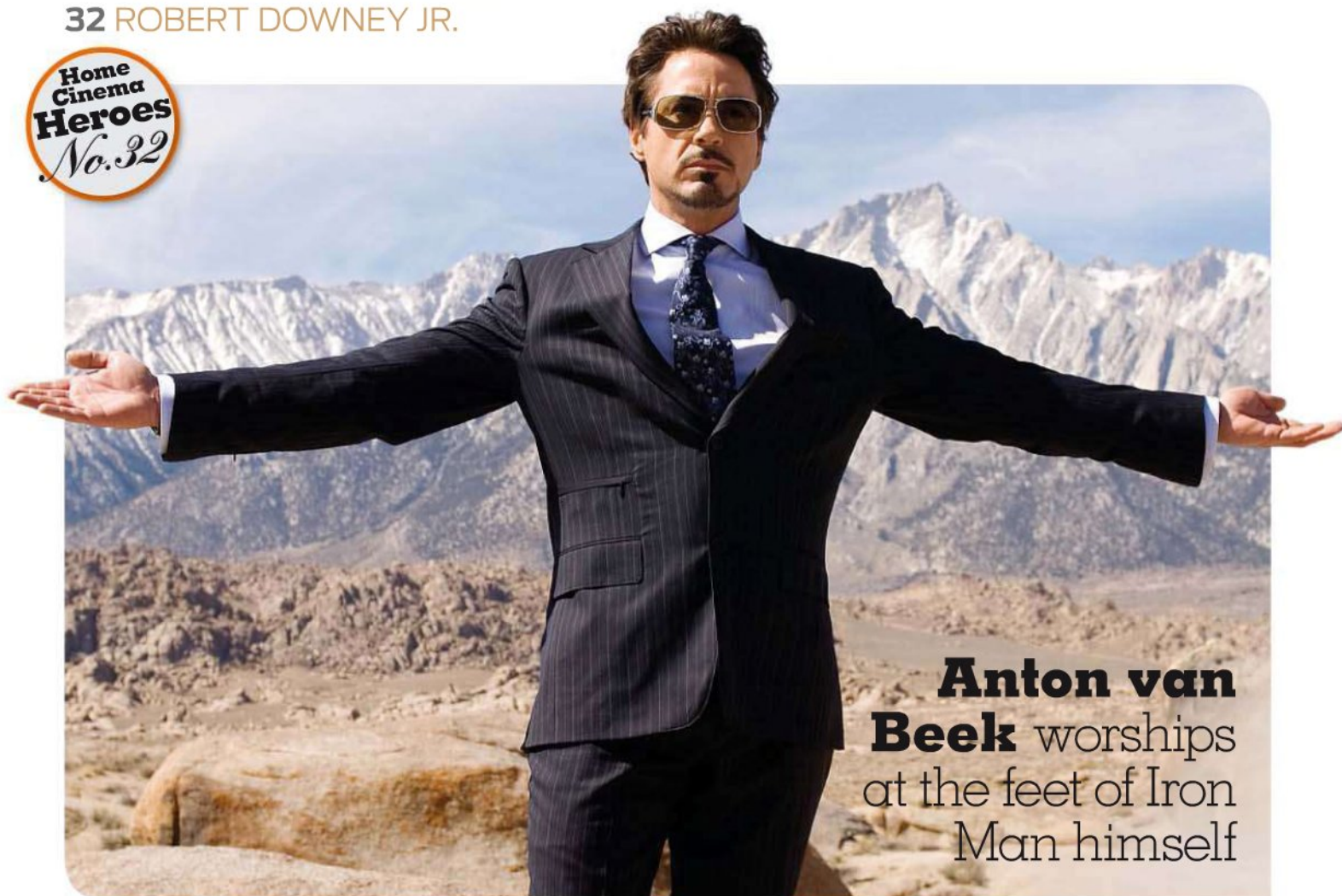


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Anton van Beek worships at the feet of Iron Man himself

Comeback king

In April 2001, while on parole for possession of cocaine and Valium, Robert Downey Jr. was found wandering barefoot in Culver City, and was arrested again for suspicion of being under the influence of drugs. The actor was quickly written out of the hit TV series *Ally McBeal*, dropped from the high-profile rom-com *America's Sweethearts* and faced the possibility of serious jail time. Speculation was rampant throughout Hollywood that this latest arrest would end the career of this gifted, yet clearly troubled, Academy Award-nominated actor.

Thankfully, it wasn't to be. After five years of substance abuse, Robert Downey Jr. turned his life around with the aid of meditation, rehab, yoga and even Wing Chun Kung Fu. By 2003 he was back on the big screen, thanks to his good friend Mel Gibson (the two had met while filming *Air America*) who paid the actor's insurance bond for his Hollywood remake of *The Singing Detective*.

Okay, so the film wasn't that good, and neither was his next project *Gothika* – but at least the actor was putting in the effort and often outshining his co-stars. What really mattered was that Downey Jr. had made the first steps in what has become an astonishing career comeback. And

since 2005 he's been on a spectacular roll, rising up through the Hollywood ranks via exceptional performances in indie projects like *A Scanner Darkly* and *Good Night, and Good Luck* and taking leading roles in the kind of Hollywood blockbusters (*Iron Man*, *Sherlock Holmes*) that he was never even considered for before his trouble with the law.

Thunderstruck

Suddenly it seems like Downey Jr. is everywhere. A few years after it was rumoured that his career was dead, the actor is back and better than ever, being showered with award nominations (including a Best Actor in a Supporting Role Academy Award nom for *Tropic Thunder*) and even making it into third place in the Artists and Entertainers category in *Time* magazine's 2008 list of the most influential people.

With *Iron Man 2* hitting cinemas on April 30 and his recent smash hit *Sherlock Holmes* sleuthing onto DVD and Blu-ray, On-Demand and Digital Download in the UK on May 17, there's never been a better time to re-evaluate the 25-year career of one of Hollywood's leading men, and discover the Downey Jr. movies you may have missed ●

Elementary:
Downey Jr. as
super-sleuth
Sherlock
Holmes



Quintessential Robert Downey Jr... *Feeling heartless in Iron Man*



1 Unbreak my heart

Left for dead, Tony Stark turns to his P.A. Pepper Potts to replace the life-giving arc reactor in his chest



2 Hand on heart

Mixing high-drama and gross-out comedy, Pepper is soon reaching into Tony's chest to find some wires...



3 Achy breaky heart

... only to pull one a little too hard and accidentally yank it out, making things even worse for Tony.



4 My heart will go on

She gets it right in the end, and so ends yet another comedic *tour de force* from RDJ.

Must own...



Iron Man

Paramount → All-region BD
£30 Approx

In one of the best pieces of casting ever, Robert Downey Jr. plays billionaire industrialist/playboy turned hi-tech superhero Tony Stark in this fabulous popcorn flick.

62.22: Tony's first test flight in the Iron Man armour doesn't quite go as planned – cue a funny and thrilling FX showcase that envelops you with its Dolby TrueHD 5.1 audio.

78.32: Tanks and missile launchers are no match for *Iron Man* in a top-notch action sequence.



Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£25 Approx

A brilliant comedic thriller from Shane Black, with a burglar hiding out in LA as an actor (Downey Jr.), a gay private eye (Val Kilmer) and a struggling actress (Michelle Monaghan) caught up in a bizarre murder mystery. One of the most criminally overlooked films of the Noughties.

86.48: This car-chase and crash is a great little action scene. It's just a shame that the Blu-ray doesn't offer up the lossless audio you'd hope for.



Zodiac

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
Director's Cut → £20 Approx

David Fincher's epic crime drama about the Zodiac killer and the men obsessed with tracking him down is a modern masterpiece, with Downey Jr. outstanding as louche crime reporter Paul Avery.

50.56: This dimly-lit bar scene is beautifully rendered by Warner's hi-def encode.

66.06: Having learnt that he might be a target for Zodiac, Paul heads to the local gun range and begins his slow descent into paranoia.



Chaplin

Optimum → R2 DVD
£13 Approx

Richard Attenborough's playful look at the life of one of Hollywood's greatest stars has its flaws, but none of them can be attributed to its leading man. Downey Jr.'s transformation into Chaplin is extraordinary, capturing the mannerisms, look and spirit of the star perfectly – no wonder he got an Academy Award nomination.

30.55: Chaplin demonstrates his comedy drunk routine, giving Downey Jr. the chance to show off his own impressive physical comedy abilities.

Worth seeing...



A Scanner Darkly

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
(US Import) → £16 Approx

Maybe not the best Philip K. Dick adaptation, but Richard Linklater's rotoscoped animated feature is at least the most faithful to his writing. And while Keanu Reeves takes centre stage in this paranoid sci-fi thriller, it's Downey Jr. who steals the film as his hyperactive and shifty friend Barris.

01.00: Right from the opening shot, it's clear how well this Blu-ray's pin-sharp and expertly rendered VC-1 1080p encode handles the unique rotoscoped animation.



Natural Born Killers

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£20 Approx

Oliver Stone's controversial and OTT media satire gave Downey Jr. the chance to cut loose as ratings-chasing *American Maniacs* TV show host Wayne Gale. Not the most subtle performance you'll ever see, but that doesn't mean it isn't great to watch.

74.56: Gale finally gets his exclusive sit-down interview with psychopathic killer Mickey Knox (Woody Harrelson). Unsurprisingly, it isn't long before everything goes to hell...



Tropic Thunder

DreamWorks → All-region BD
£27 Approx

Robert Downey Jr. steals the show as five-time Oscar-winning method actor Kurt Lazarus in this amusing action movie satire. Lazarus undergoes 'pigmentation alteration' surgery to play an African American GI, much to the annoyance of his black co-star.

41.17: 'Everybody knows, you never go full retard.' Citing *I Am Sam* and *Rainman*, Lazarus explains why Stiller's character will never get an Oscar for his performance in the (fictional) redneck drama *Simple Jack*.



Gothika

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£20 Approx

Even our Home Cinema Hero can't enliven this tedious mix of thriller and supernatural horror, where he takes a supporting role to Halle Berry's psychiatric patient.

11.38: Downey Jr. provides the film's cheapest scare, startling Halle Berry by putting his umbrella up!

21.46: Confronted by another bout of Berry's hysterically shrill over-acting, Downey Jr. tackles her to the floor and gets a pair of orderlies to subdue her. We know exactly how he feels.

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the first website I check
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something electrical"*

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INSTALLS

→ **Smarthome highlights** **HIGH-END CABLES** Peerless announces new range of top-quality connects – including HDMI v1.4 **ISOTEK** Get better audio with a premium power cable **PHILIPS PRONTO** Two-way iPod control **MULTIROOM MARVEL** Take a tour of a stunning smarthome installation **AV-HOLIC!** An *HCC* reader guides you through his home cinema setup



Lounge life

Want to add hi-tech AV to your living room without it taking over? Check out this stealth cinema, page 38

Peerless creates Ultimate connectors

Cables running the gamut from alpha to omega cover all options and most budgets

The devil is in the detail – especially when it comes to the top end of home cinema. There's no point in forking out for the best-quality hardware if you're planning on connecting it all together with substandard cabling – it would be akin to filling a Formula 1 car with road-standard gasoline.

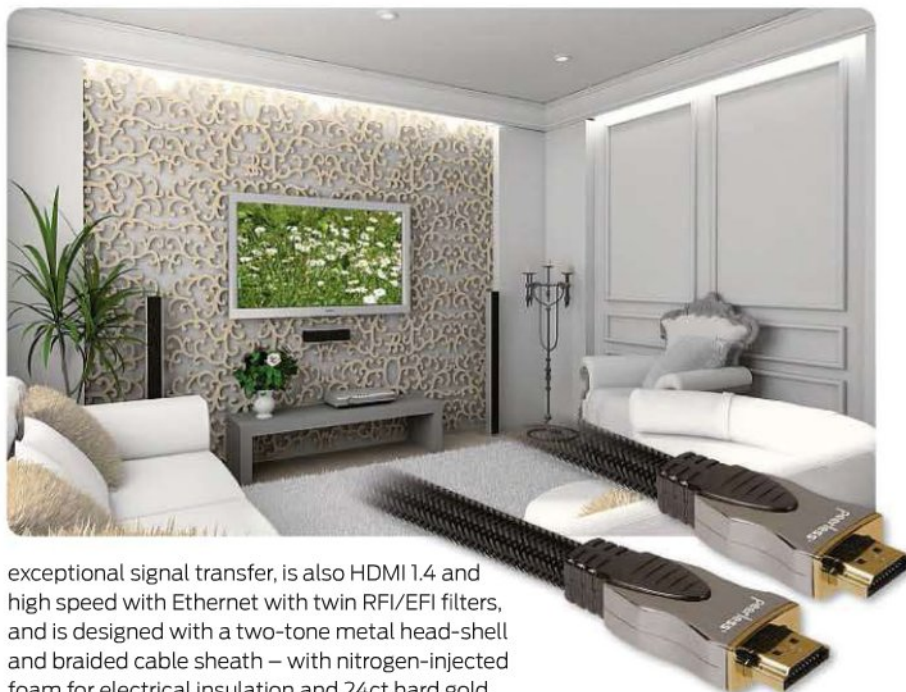
Indeed, that's not as weird a comparison as it sounds: the fuel used in F1 cars is actually quite similar to ordinary road gas, but with a much more tightly controlled mix. And, of course, top-end home cinema cabling is in essence the same as mid- or lower-end cabling, but also has 'tighter controls' – mainly in build quality. Both the fuel and the cables produce similar results: they squeeze better overall performance from the highest-quality engineered products.

One AV brand to have recognised this is Peerless AV-Europe. It has introduced its 'Ultimate' Omega HDMI connectors, as part of its just-launched extensive range of cables, designed by connectivity guru Ray Phillips. HCC has been given an exclusive first look.

Omega HDMI has been created to maximise the performance of top-end home cinema equipment. It's HDMI 1.4-ready, high-speed with Ethernet and includes twin RFI/EFI filters, with an additional filter for TV power cables.

It also looks the part, boasting a solid brass head-shell, with black mirror finish and chrome insert. Electrically insulated with Teflon, the cable contacts are 24ct 'hard' gold, and shielding is multiple tinned copper braiding and aluminium foil. The Omega is available in one- and two-metre lengths, at £130 and £150 respectively.

Next in Peerless' range are the more affordable Sigma cables, including HDMI, phono, digital coaxial, digital optical and Scart. The Sigma HDMI boasts silver-plated OFC conductors for



exceptional signal transfer, is also HDMI 1.4 and high speed with Ethernet with twin RFI/EFI filters, and is designed with a two-tone metal head-shell and braided cable sheath – with nitrogen-injected foam for electrical insulation and 24ct hard gold. A two-metre Sigma HDMI retails for £100.

Pitched at the mid-range, but also HDMI 1.4-ready, are Slimline and Delta – allowing Peerless to be the only cables brand to currently offer 1.4 HDMI from £150 down to £40.

Designed for connecting to super-slim LED TVs and complementing Peerless Slimline wall-mounts, the £60 two-metre Slimline HDMI projects 14mm from the rear of the screen, at a right angle, and uses super-slim 3mm cable.

The Delta range includes 17 cable arrays in total, including the £40 one-metre 1.4 HDMI. Peerless has also launched Alpha as a first step up from in-the-box cables, with 25 arrays in total including a £20 1 metre 1.3b HDMI.

24 carat gold: With contacts like these, these interconnects are as much 'street' as household

iPod for Philips – Pronto!



Philips Pronto has launched its much-anticipated two-way integration module. Intended

to allow an iPod's contents to be available on wireless Pronto control panels, Philips and industry partner iPod have been working on the interface for some time.

'Thanks to the iPod integration module, Pronto users will now be able to access their iPod music throughout the home,' we were informed by Dick Mol, Pronto's Senior Product Manager. 'The two-way feedback that iPod offers is being fully exploited.'

More than a mains cable



For those of you who have spent a king's ransom on AV kit, it may be worth splashing another £875 out on an Isotek 'pre-filter device'. Not convinced? Well, the logic is that the Syncro power cable will enhance the quality of the electrical signal – your equipment's lifeblood – thus letting your kit unleash its full potential. In technical terms, it synchronises the mains supply to produce a perfect symmetrical sine wave while removing contaminants, which it seems, is a good thing. More obviously, it's heavy gauge, triple screened and available now.

X Masks the spot



Screen Research has introduced its new Reference X-Mask2 projection screen range. Replacing the previous X-Mask range, XMask2 offers significant design advances.

The Flush-housing SlimFrame design with Handcrafted Velour finish means the screen has low visual and physical impact, whilst maintaining excellent image borders. Plus, reduced distance between masks, frame, and the projection surface minimises any shadow cast on the projection surface.

Screen Research's QuietGlide motor mounting and masking system provides smooth and quiet system operation.

CEDIA returns



CI industry body CEDIA has announced that its annual Awards dinner is to be held on April 16

beneath the reconstructed Globe theatre on London's Bankside. The black tie event, which celebrates the best residential custom installation projects of the past year, takes in UnderGlobe, a purpose-built entertainment space directly beneath the open-air Shakespearean theatre.

Established in 2006, the CEDIA Awards recognise and promote high-quality system designs and installs. We'll feature the best of the entrants in a future issue of HCC.

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Anton van Beek checks out a Victorian home given a stunning 21st Century upgrade



Great expectations



The owner has commissioned an oil copy of Klimt's *Hope II* on canvas to replace the temporary canvas that currently hides the projector hole (right)



As a committed technophobe I never believed I would personally benefit from a whole home audio-visual system,' says the owner of this Victorian family home given a 21st Century makeover by the pro-install experts from The Big Picture. But, after one look at the pictures on these pages, it's hardly a surprise that she's changed her mind: 'I probably get more out of the system than the rest of the family put together. And we never have to pay cinema prices any longer, as the experience is improved upon hugely in our own lounge.'

Not that this room looks like a full-fat home theatre – it's still very much a living room. The install team designed an artificial fireplace surround that could house the TV, projector screen and games consoles, and a centre speaker is housed in the false fire opening. An antique fireguard was sourced to complete the look of a simple yet 'Victorian-esque' original fireplace.

Most of the remaining kit, including amplifiers, Sky+HD box, music server, and video matrix, are housed in a sliding rack in the basement so that it doesn't clutter the living space.

'The look on guests' faces, when we invite them round to our home to watch the latest DVD release, is a picture,' says the happy cinema owner. 'Especially when they see us dim the lighting, close the curtains, turn on the projector and drop the screen from the fireplace all with one quick touch of a button. It's kind of a James Bond experience that never wears thin.'

Kit Checklist

Panasonic: TH-42PZ700 42in Full HD plasma; DMP-BD55 Blu-ray player

JVC: DLA-HD350 Full HD D-ILA projector

The Big Picture: Custom projector mount; custom mirror mechanism; custom media server; custom 7.5TB NAS

Harkness Hall: Electric 2.35:1 projector screen

Linn: 2 x Akurate 242 floorstanding speakers; 1 x Akurate 225 centre speaker; 2 x Custom 2K 106 in-wall speakers; 2 x 106 solid wall back boxes; Akurate Kontrol pre-amplifier; Akurate 3200 power amplifier; Majik 4100 power amplifier; Akurate FM/DAB tuner; Genki CD player

Velodyne: SC-IF/IC in-floor subwoofer; SC-1250 subwoofer power-amp; SMS-1 subwoofer management system

Sky: Sky+HD set-top box

Gefen: 4:2 HDMI Switch

Nintendo: Wii console

Microsoft: Xbox 360 console

Gyration: Bluetooth keyboard and mouse

Goelst: Electric curtain track

CUE: Control system; 8in touchpanel controller

Apple: Apple TV

Middle Atlantic: Sliding rotating rack; custom faceplates

40 INSTALLS

A Box of tricks

At eleven-foot, the ceiling in the main room was too high for a lift. Instead, the projector is mounted vertically in a thermally-managed antique mahogany key cabinet in the adjacent hallway, with the light angled 90 degrees into the room via an aerospace-grade mirror. Cool!

B Bass below

The subwoofer was originally tested in-room to determine the optimum position, before cutting a hole in the floorboards under a sofa and fastening it to the joists

C Family matters

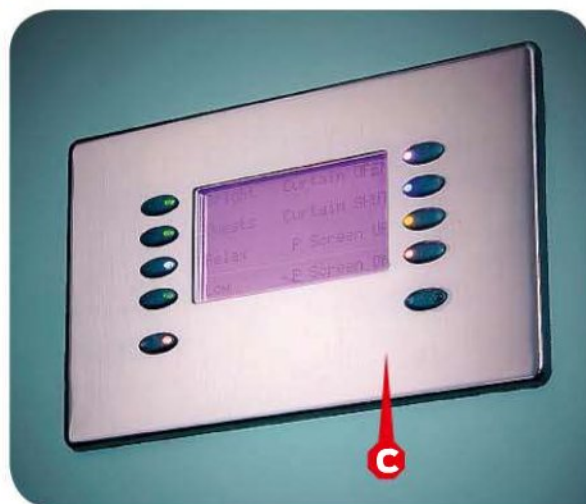
With so much tech involved throughout the house, it was vital that the bespoke programmed controls (including this Mode Evolution centralised lighting and automation system) were simple and intuitive enough for the entire family to get to grips with

D Stand and deliver

A true audiophile, the musician owner was keen to make use of floorstanding front speakers, which would occupy the dead space either side of the chimney breast

E House of nuts

All but the glass of the 42in Full HD Panasonic plasma is hidden from view by the fireplace's solid walnut surround. The owner also insisted that the screen would not be be mounted so high that it would be uncomfortable to view – something he claimed was a common occurrence at friends' homes



PHOTOS: JON MASON PHOTOGRAPHY – BIRMINGHAM

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These photos feature just a small selection of Musical Images' installation work over the past 20 years.

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Anton van Beek visits a luxury smarthome in the heart of London

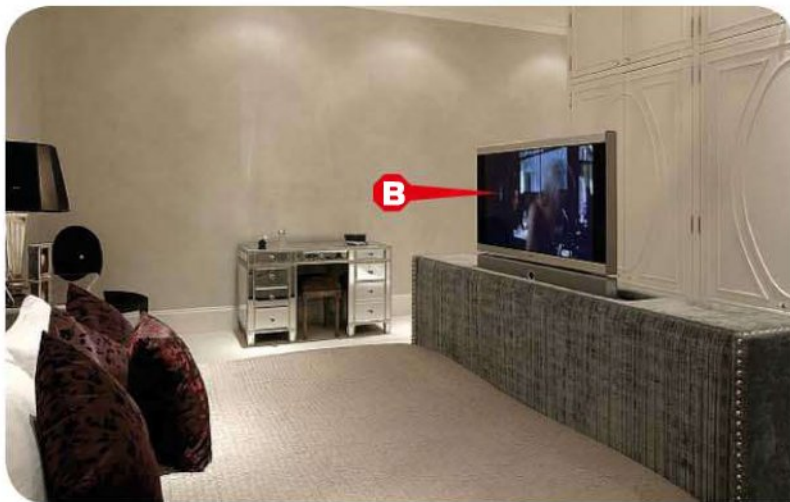
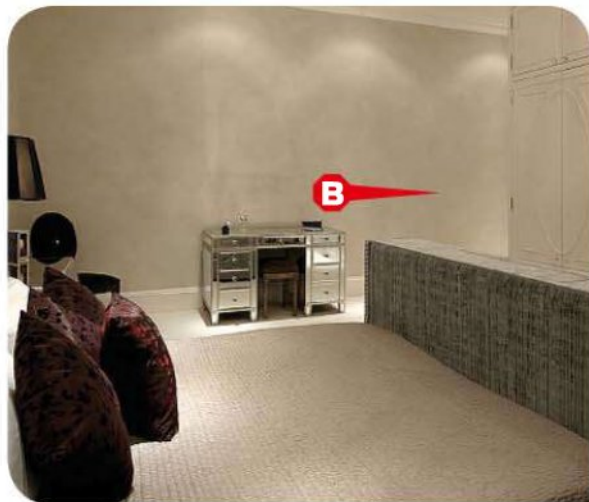
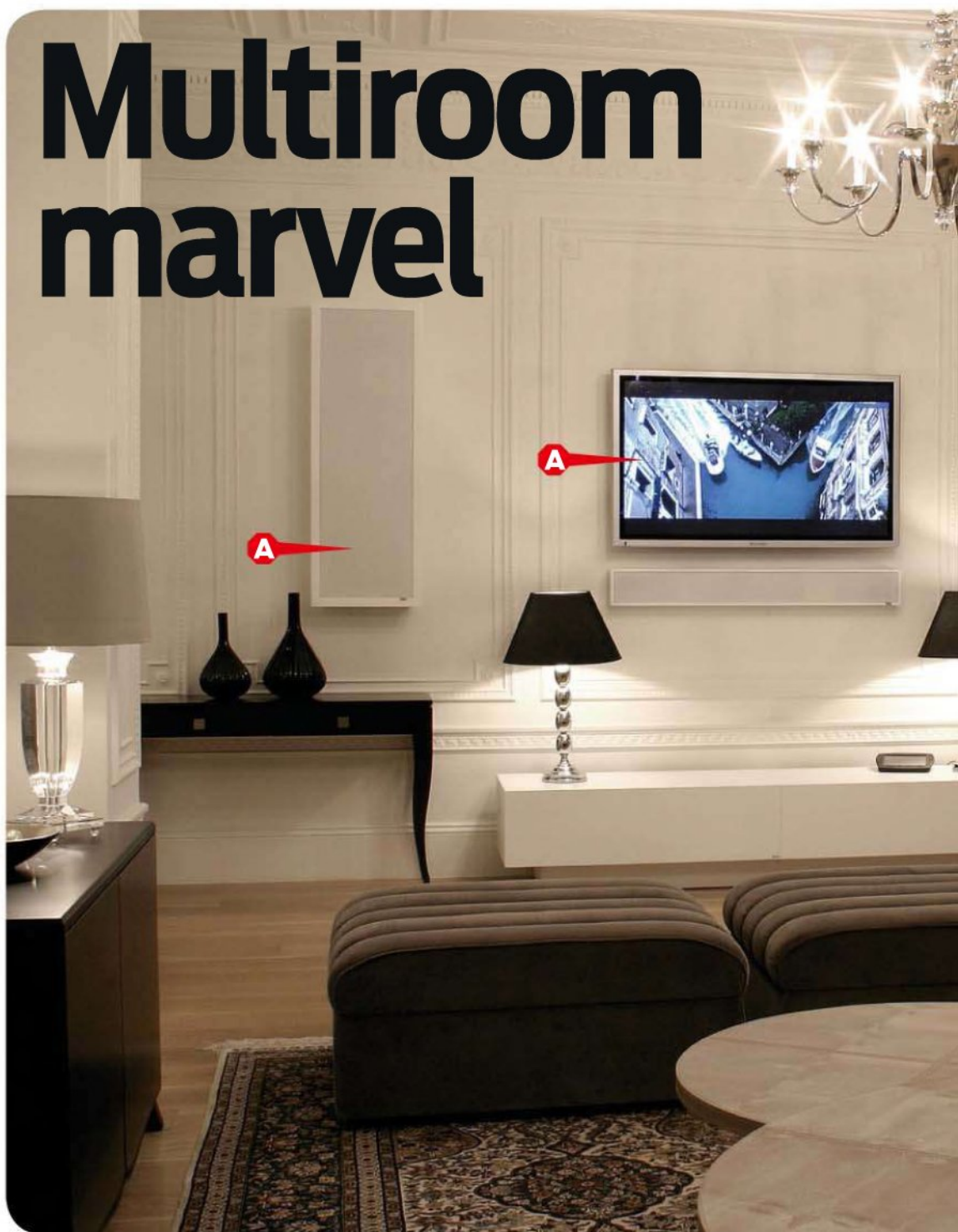
Following the successful completion of a multiroom AV and cinema project on the south coast, the owners of that house called back Maven AV to work a similar kind of magic on their luxury London apartment.

Considering that the installers were working on a listed property and needed to deliver a system that would prove sympathetic to the existing classical décor, there's no denying that the end result is gob-smacking. Not only is it packed with stylish, cutting-edge tech, but it's also easy to use – a good thing as it's in use every day, by both the family and the housekeepers!

Ongoing project

While the bulk of the installation work was completed by Christmas 2007, this remains a work in progress. Maven continues to provide support for the owners – including remote diagnostic functionality. Plans are already in place for a variety of upgrades, including 1080p video distribution throughout the entire house and the addition of Kaleidescape 1080p/Blu-ray players when they become available ●

Multiroom marvel





→ Kit Checklist

Equipment cupboard

Middle Atlantic: Rack with thermal management and power conditioning/distribution
CISCO: Gigabit network switch
Apple: 500GB Time Capsule
Sky: 2 x Sky+HD set-top boxes
Kramer: High-definition video matrix
Crestron: CP2e control processor; CNX-PAD8A audio distribution processor; CNRFGWA RF receiver
Kaleidescape: 5U Media Server; K-player
Denon: TU-1500AE radio tuner
iLight: Lighting panels and curtain relay modules

Reception room

Panasonic: TH-50PH10 plasma
Artcoustic: 4 x DFF 120-43 X2 speakers; 1 x DF Multi 50 X2 L/C/R loudspeaker; 4 x PA 300 power amp; 2 x Linux Duo cabinets
Lexicon: MC8 audio processor
Kaleidescape: K-player
Sky: Sky+HD set-top box
Sony: PlayStation3 console
Crestron: TPMC8X touchpanel
iLight: Wallmount touchpanel



Room essentials

A Mounting worries

The biggest challenge was wall-mounting the TV and speakers. A specialist drill was used to allow cables to be 'sewn' through the walls without damaging the valuable wall coverings and listed mouldings

B Rise and shine

Even the guest bedroom features high-end AV, including this Loewe Individual 32in LCD mounted on custom Future Automation kit that allows it to rise up out of the foot of the bed

C Water world

Both the master *en suite* and guest bathrooms feature 19in Aquavision screens, so you can watch TV while having a soak

D Amp it up

The Artcoustic speakers in the reception room are powered by this quartet of PA 300 power amps

E Master chef

The kitchen got a hi-tech makeover, too, including these Artcoustic Diablo Target in-ceiling speakers, plus a Loewe Individual 32in LCD, Crestron ML-600 handheld remote and iLight touchpanel



Certified: AV-holic!

Every issue, an **HCC reader** invites you to take a tour of their beloved home cinema setup...



Killing two birds:
Our AV-holic discovered that extending the house was also the perfect time to design and fit a home cinema

Introduce yourself...

Richard Westmoreland, age 32.

And you're an AV-holic?

For as long as I can remember! I used to go to the cinema on my day off and watch three films in a row, so when I left university and got a job, one of the first things I did was save up and buy a TV and surround sound setup. Since then the gear has changed more often than I like to think about. Children have come along so TVs and speakers have gone on-wall and kit hidden in AV cabinets, but when we extended our home, I decided to take the plunge and 'do the job properly'...

What's in your setup now?

A 50in Panasonic plasma recessed via a Future Automation bracket, plus Niles in-wall/in-ceiling speakers, Mission 773s and a Speakercraft TS12 sub powered by a Pioneer receiver. Sources include a Pioneer BDP-LX52 Blu-ray player; PS3; Toshiba HD DVD player; and a Panasonic DVD/

HDD recorder. Control is done by a Philips TSU9600 Pronto with an RFX9600 serial extender.

I've also got a Sonos multiroom system in seven zones with Niles in-ceiling speakers in all of them – except the garden.

How much have you spent on your AV habit over the years?

I would guess only about £10k, but then it helps to work in the electrical retail business...

What does your wife think of your hobby?

She loves the new setup, and aside from initial trepidation, has got to love the various Prontos I've had over the past 10 years. But I do think she wishes I'd stop tinkering with them so she can keep track of where the buttons are.

What's your current fave disc?

Erm, tough one. Of my Blu-rays, *Wanted* gets played a lot, on HD DVD I still love *V for Vendetta*.

Are you excited about 3D?

Not massively. Unless you've got a projector, I doubt most people will get the benefit ●

Room essentials

A Built-in bigscreen

AV-holic Richard has recessed his Panasonic TX-P50V10 NeoPDP screen into a custom-built chimney breast, which also houses the centre speaker

B Mission complete?

The Mission floorstanders are left over from an earlier cinema system and will probably be replaced next

C Hideaway

Mid-Atlantic Slim5 racking was chosen to store the AV components out of sight and the kids' grubby fingers. In an über-cool touch, the rack even slides back into a dedicated cupboard space

D Pioneer spirit

Pioneer's VSX-LX52 receiver delivers a meaty 7 x 150W of amplification, and will do all the hi-res audio decoding of Richard's Blu-rays and HD DVDs

Join the club

Do you want to see your home cinema system featured in the pages of *Home Cinema Choice*? If so, log on to www.homecinemachoice.com/avholic where you'll find all the information you need.

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REVIEWS

→ **Hardware highlights** SONY 40in Freeview HD Bravia with online talents
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 brand's debut 3D Blu-ray spinner LG Versatile NAS/Blu-ray burner TEUFEL THX Ultra2-certified
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JVC goes Size 'O'

At only 6.4mm deep, the LT-32WX50 definitely turns heads. But does its performance match? See p64

HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 5
Above average	1 2 3 4 5
Acceptable	1 2 3 4 5
Disappointing	1 2 3 4 5
Dire	1 2 3 4 5

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Sony's KDL-40EX503 is one of the first TVs to receive the DVB-T2 broadcast standard

→ Specifications

HD Ready: YES Full HD, 1080p24
Tuner: YES Freeview HD; analogue
Component video: YES 1 input HDMI: YES 4 inputs
PC input: YES D-Sub 15 pin
Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080 Audio: 2x 10W
Brightness (claimed): N/A
Contrast ratio (claimed): 'High'
Dimensions (w/o stand): 992(w) x 599(h) x 99(d)mm
Weight (w/o stand): 14.2kg
Features: Media playback from USB; DLNA; Nicam stereo sound; MPEG/standard noise reduction; 24p playback; black correction; dynamic contrast adjust; white balance adjust; ambient sensor; backlight adjust internet connectivity

BRAVIA



The app store

Chris Jenkins hooks up Sony's Freeview HD, Internet-enabled LCD TV



AV/CV

Product:
40in LCD TV
with integrated
Freeview
HD tuner

Position:
Entry-level in
Sony's 2010
lineup

Peers:
Forthcoming
Freeview HD
TVs from
Samsung,
Toshiba,
Panasonic *et al*

All the excitement about 3D has rather distracted us from the fact that many viewers haven't yet caught up with HD. There's also another revolution going on, in Internet-enabled TV. Sony's KDL-40EX503 ticks both boxes.

Since there are relatively few HD sources around, many viewers could even have bought an HD set, yet rarely see HD material. Obviously, if you own a Blu-ray player or subscribe to a Pay-TV platform you'll get some hi-def content, and there's even some HD on Freesat. But as far as many people are concerned, free-to-air HD (without the satellite dish) has been a bit slow in coming.

So it's good to see that high-def material is now available to the masses via Freeview HD, with this Sony set probably the first compatible screen on sale.

We've already seen a Freeview HD receiver (the Humax HD-Fox T2), and if you have bought a TV recently, adding a set-top box is obviously the way to go. But if you've been holding off waiting for an integrated HDTV, this Sony could be it.

Of course, you have to bear in mind that Freeview HD is in its infancy, and at the time of writing is available only in areas served by the London and Manchester transmitters. Check whether your area is served at www.freeview.co.uk.

At the same time, Sony has made some improvements to its TV's web capabilities which could be even more significant in the long term.

In motion

So, on to the KDL-40EX503, one of the first sets to market able to receive the DVB-T2 broadcast standard.

Unobjectionably designed with a rectilinear aspect and a partly

brushed aluminium finish, this is a Full HD Bravia TV featuring Sony's familiar Bravia Engine 3 picture processing features, covering everything from colour and contrast to sharpness and upscaling of standard-def signals to HD. Also featured are the MotionFlow 100Hz system designed to reduce judder and LCD motion blur, and online functions complete with video streaming features.

Gone, though, is Sony's paltry Applicast web offering. Always limited in its features, **Applicast has been superseded by Bravia Internet Video**, an open platform with a much wider scope for developers. Initially, the system will access services such as YouTube, DailyMotion and Facebook; eventually it will support video rental and video-on-demand via LOVEFILM, catch-up TV services such as BBC iPlayer, and widgets for services such as news and sports feeds, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, financial news, weather reports, and shopping channels.

Much of this is in the early stages and was not implemented on the set we tested, but the TV is also DLNA compatible, so you can connect it to networkable devices such as PCs, mobile phones and MP3 players. We were able to stream HD movie content from a PC to the TV, and there's also a USB port for direct connection of media. The set is Wi-Fi Ready, so you can add an optional wireless adapter or USB dongle to access your wireless home network, and the PhotoTV HD function adjusts picture parameters for optimum viewing of digital stills.

User Settings give a wide range of viewing options, including a choice of Scenes Select and Live Colour >

→ Tech Labs



Bravia Engine 3: Sony's picture processing upscales SD pictures with considerable aplomb

Modes to match picture quality to the material being viewed. Of course, there's a 24p True Cinema function for 24-frames-per-second playback of movie material.

The set's Eco functions include an ambient sensor, so the TV can automatically detect the brightness and colour temperature of ambient light in the room and optimise image quality, and a low power mode which reduces consumption at the cost of diminishing screen brightness.

There are four HDMI inputs, two on the side and two on the rear, along with a plethora of other connectors including two Scarts, optical digital audio, PC, and component video.

The operating system uses a version of Sony's well-established Xross Media Bar. If you're used to the PlayStation 3, this will probably suit you fine; some may find it confusing and fussy, though. There'll be no such worries with the Freeview EPG, which presents all the necessary info in a clear way, using thumbnails to show the selected channels.

One hot screen

Though this is a conventional LCD set with CCFL backlighting, and we've been spoiled recently by looking at LED-backlit sets with phenomenal contrast ratios, the KDL-40EX503 does offer excellent black levels without sacrificing detail in dark areas. Sony doesn't quote a dynamic contrast ratio, just describing it as 'High', but our Tech Labs measurements were impressive at almost 50,000:1. The colour temperature presets, on the other

hand, measured rather hot, but this may be because our screen was a marketing sample.

HD images convey plenty of detail while retaining levels of sharpness, but it looks realistic rather than striking. Colours are fine, again more on the natural side than anything stunning; of course, you can play around with picture modes if you want something more in-er-face. Standard-definition material is upscaled well with little noticeable exaggeration of source noise.

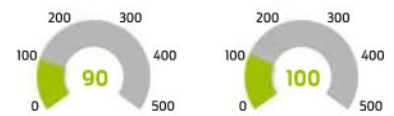
At the moment the BBC's Freeview HD broadcasts are at an early stage, so it's a bit premature to come to any conclusions regarding the Sony's Freeview HD performance; but suffice it to say that the pictures represent a considerable improvement over Freeview SD.

Finally, the KDL-40EX503's sound performance is not going to knock you off your settee. While the 'invisible' speaker system run up to full volume without introducing any distortion on our test clips, it's more noticeable for its clean treble and midrange than bass performance.

Wait and see

This is an impressive set, given that it offers typical Sony quality, plus all the attractions of free HD broadcasts and the wonders of the 'net. As for 3D – pah! – who needs it? But considering the slow roll-out of Freeview HD, there's plenty of time to wait for some alternatives to the KDL-40EX503 to come along – possibly even Sony's 603 and 703 ranges, which add edge-LED lighting to the mix.

Power consumption: Watts



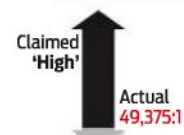
White screen:

An impressively low consumption with our 100IRE signal – and Eco mode reduces it to a tiny 49W

Test footage:

A slight increase in power use with film footage and full audio

Contrast: ratio



Picture:

Decent contrast ratio of almost 50,000:1, with a luminance of 44.8fl, in Standard mode

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets:

A small range of CT presets, none particularly accurate, but manual adjustment of R/G/B level and gain are available for perfect adjustment
8,507K: Neutral
8,568K: Cool
8,603K: Warm 2
8,611K: Warm 1



HCC VERDICT

Sony KDL-40EX503
£900 Approx

Highs: Integrated Freeview HD tuner; expanded online features; DLNA functions; solid picture

Lows: Limited sound performance, only one USB socket

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



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Spherical cinema

These curvy enclosures from US direct sales brand Orb Audio certainly look the part, but, wonders **Alvin Gold**, do they sound good, too?



Orb Audio describes itself as a 'high-end manufacturer', which subscribes to an 'innovative direct business model'. The model in question is direct sales from manufacturer to end user, bypassing the traditional retail chain, and the inevitable cost mark-ups that this involves. Specifically, Orb claims that the system sampled here, which currently appears to be its only product, though it is available in various versions, ranks above many speaker systems that retail 'north of \$2500'. Also that direct sales cuts at least 50 per cent off the manufacturer's suggested retail price, while delivering higher performance and 'white glove' customer performance – whatever that is when it's at home. Orb makes additional claims for its direct sales operation, too, which it says allows it to use the highest-quality components and expensive handmade materials while simultaneously keeping prices in check. The question is, of course, can these claims be justified?

There are several statements on the Orb website that don't stand up to scrutiny. The general one, that the brand is high-end, just isn't so, when based on any meaningful definition of the high-end. More specifically, the so called digital hybrid amplifier used in the subwoofer is not digital at all. It is a variant on the Class D theme, but the letter D as used here is simply the next letter in the alphabet after A, B and C, and doesn't imply digital. It is an analogue topology, albeit cool running. Another claim, that the satellites don't use crossovers, is true enough, but disingenuous. There is no crossover because there

AV/CV

Product:
Compact, modular 5.1 channel speaker package

Positioning:
Mid-range setup – various alternative satellite finishes and support options

Peers:
KEF KHT3005; Cabasse Eole 2



is no tweeter to share the acoustic load. Also the so-called 'full-range', 3in driver is certainly not full range, because it doesn't cover the full range of audio frequencies (generally taken as 20Hz-20kHz) at any usable level. As a system, the subwoofer takes care of the low frequency heavy lifting, but the treble is limited by geometry of the satellite drive unit.

Even the more basic claim that Orb's marketing model is innovative should be taken with a pinch of salt. A number of speaker makers over the years have ploughed the direct sales furrow, of which the best known currently is German manufacturer Teufel, which offers

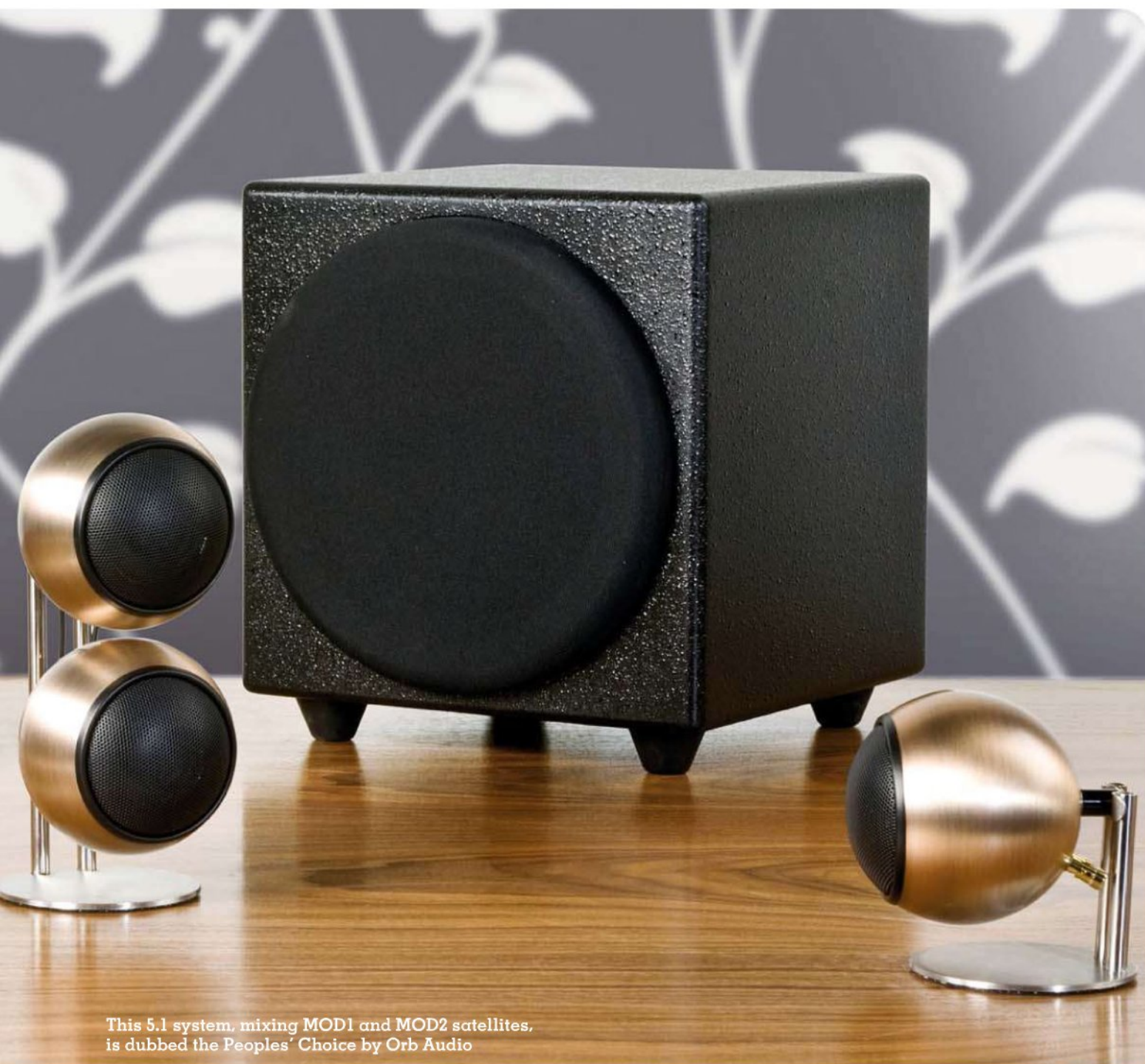
a much broader range of models over a much wider range of price points. (See page 81 for our review of Teufel's new System 8 THX Ultra 2 package).

The savings from buying a speaker through the traditional retail channel is real enough in principal, but again the devil is in the detail. The system reviewed here is attractively priced, and you do get some protection by taking advantage of the maker's 30-day no hassle home trial. This means you can decide whether you like them, and whether to return them, which can be for any reason or no reason at all. This is currently at the user's expense, though Orb is

setting up a UK office which can be used for returns. Shipping to the UK in the first instance is reasonably priced – \$45 per pair of satellites, \$200 for a full system with subwoofer plus tracking and insurance. You can find out more by emailing support@orbaudio.com, which promises a response within hours. Not too many, hopefully.

MODs are rockers

For this review, *HCC* was supplied with two satellite models and a subwoofer. The satellites are closely related: the MOD1 is a single-enclosure model fitted with a single drive unit in its diminutive spherical



This 5.1 system, mixing MOD1 and MOD2 satellites, is dubbed the Peoples' Choice by Orb Audio



Finishing line:

Orb Audio's MOD1s can be ordered in black, white, copper and steel finishes, too

housing, supplied with a simple steel desktop support. The MOD2 consists of two of the above stacked vertically or horizontally (the latter is better adapted to the centre channel role), which are fitted to a taller or wider version of the support. A key benefit of the design is that it is modular – MOD1 can be upgraded to MOD2 simply and economically. A heavy floor stand is also available at extra cost. There are two compact subwoofers too, one based on an 8in driver (tested here), the other a similar design based on a 10in unit, housed in a slightly larger enclosure.

The subwoofers look very similar to a number of other designs, from REL, for example. And if you think you've seen something similar to the MOD1 in the past, well you have. It's from Anthony Gallo, whose speakers are visually similar and indeed much more expensive. In fact, the two brands are related: one of the Orb co-founders, Gary Pelled, was also a partner in Gallo Acoustics, and they are clearly working from a similar aesthetic blueprint, though technically and sonically, the designs are miles apart.

The Orb MOD1 satellite consists of a single spherical enclosure made from steel with a brushed finish in most of its versions, though a range of alternative finishes and colours are available. The spheres are just over four inches in diameter and house a single 3in drive unit. Wiring hooks up via springclip terminals rather than 4mm plugs, which are easy to use with modest gauge bare wires, but which preclude using 4mm plugs.

The sound of round

The audio performance of Orb's system is interesting, and largely positive, though it is hard to accept that the satellites and the subwoofer were designed by the same team. They don't just look at odds with each other, they are voiced quite differently. In fact, this is a concealed

compliment for the subwoofer, which is surprisingly deep and tuneful, with a fluid quality that is missing from many apparently similar designs.

The satellites, of course, dominate the picture sonically, and there are some good features to be highlighted here, though my final judgement is mixed. On the plus side, **both versions of the satellite are bold and detailed**. There's plenty of presence and sparkle, but the balance is very mid dominant. The upper bass and lower midrange are lean and dry, while the upper midband has a rather sharp, aggressive feel that may not wear well for all listeners. The upper treble doesn't really exist – overtones of the midrange tend to dominate.

This overall effect can be a tad tiring, and doesn't really pass muster as neutral. However, in its favour the system can be driven to surprisingly high volume levels without breaking up, and the warm balance tends to suit high-octane film soundtracks. It certainly did justice to the likes of *Kill Bill* or *Quantum of Solace*.

Choosing which version of the Orb system to go for is not entirely straightforward. The single and dual version of the satellite sounds very similar. There is no extra bass from the larger model, which is limited to a moderate increase in the maximum volume level, less distortion under full throttle drive but the same slightly aggressive quality and trademark clarity.

The satellites look wonderful, but the subwoofer is much more agricultural in appearance. There are some stunning finishes for the sats, including antique copper – a personal favourite – though the cost of the hand-finished specials is significantly higher. Orb suggests strongly that the smaller subwoofer will suffice for most systems as long as the room is not too large, but it will advise on this, and other system related issues, if required ●

→ Specifications

MOD1 satellite

Drive Units: 1x 3in full-range driver, polypropylene cone with synthetic surround. Magnetically shielded

Enclosure: Sealed steel (finishes include premium black or pearl white powder coat, polished steel, antique copper)

Frequency Response: N/A

Sensitivity: 89dB

Power Handling: 110W

Dimensions: 105mm diameter

Weight: 0.8kg

Super Eight subwoofer

Drive Unit: 1x 8in

Enclosure: Direct radiating, vented via flared port; wood

Frequency Response: 28-180Hz

On board power: 200W

Dimensions: 29.8(w) x 30.5(h) x 29.2(d)mm

Weight: 11.8kg

Connections: Line & 4mm speaker terminals inputs; 4mm speaker terminal outputs



HCC VERDICT

Orb Audio Peoples' Choice system
\$1,350 Approx (plus shipping)

Highs: Detailed sound; great-looking satellites; alternative finishes and supports; modular construction

Lows: Sometimes aggressive sound with lean lower midrange and lack of subtlety up top

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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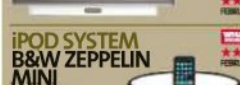
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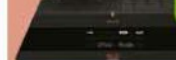
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Dark master

Epson's new EH-TW5500 proves to **John Archer** that LCD isn't just a budget projection technology

While LCD has its place in the projection world, and many dedicated followers, I've long felt that its inherent weakness – black level response – makes it a problematic technology to use at the higher end of the market.

Epson, though, is having none of this. Its flagship EH-TW5500 costs the best part of four grand, putting it in the same price ball-park as JVC's HD550 custom install D-ILA projector. Ouch.

The TW5500's build quality is suitably luxurious, with its heavy-duty matt-black finish and no-nonsense shape combining practicality (it won't stand out in a darkened room) with a satisfyingly serious aesthetic.

What really stands out about the TW5500, though, is its claimed 200,000:1 contrast ratio (and measured by our Tech Labs at a still very impressive 97,000:1).

The answer to how this has been achieved lies in two main parts. First,

the latest incarnation of Epson's DeepBlack system means less light is 'lost' between the bulb and your screen. Second, you've got Epson's new dual-layer notched iris design, which reduces light in two quick stages as a film switches from light to dark shots, rather than just the usual single stage. This allows the Epson to deliver more drastic shifts in light output – and thus deeper blacks – without the usual, distracting 'brightness jumps'.



AV/CV

Product:

Probably the most highly-specified LCD projector around

Position:

The TW5500 sits right at the top of Epson's new home cinema projector range

Peers:

JVC DLA-HD550; Panasonic PT-AE4000

Other important features of the TW5500 include 12bit HQV video processing (versus PixelWorks processing on the TW4400), ISF calibration support, third-party anamorphic lens support, and new frame interpolation processing.

After a startlingly easy set up, thanks to a lovely 2.1x zoom and loads of vertical and horizontal image shifting, the TW5500 quickly has me eating my 'LCD can't do premium' opinion with a slice of humble pie.

For starters, black level response is outstanding. There's practically no sign of the grey wash over dark scenes often seen with LCD projector images (including the TW4400), leaving blacks that look rich and credible. JVC's D-ILA based HD550 goes darker still, but it's a close call.

The Epson's blacks also hold good shadow detailing despite their depth.

The TW5500 also performs superbly with its colours, which are gorgeously nuanced and more vibrant than those of the TW5500's predecessor, the TW5800; the

TW4400; and JVC's HD550.

Sharpness is no issue either, as the TW5500's Full HD resolution and advanced processing allows HD material to appear with impeccable clarity and detail, yet without the grain and over-stressed edges you get with projectors that try too hard.

Contributing to the sense of clarity is the Frame Interpolation processing, which substantially reduces judder while generating hardly any nasty processing side effects. The trick is that the TW5500's system is adaptive, reducing its power when it recognises that a particular scene is going to push it into causing artefacts.

With the TW5500 also running extremely quietly in low-lamp mode, the only bad thing I can find with its performance is that occasionally it marginally loses focus without you touching anything. But aside from this piffling issue, Epson has succeeded in making me completely rethink my position about LCD's projector potential. And you can't say fairer than that.

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen:
Pretty much what you would expect for a device of this type, though it defaults to Eco mode, which consumes 244W

Powered:
No significant difference with moving video (to be expected)

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: With the 'Vivid' preset engaged, the contrast ratio of 97,000:1 is an excellent result

Colour accuracy



Presets:
Unaccountably, our measurements are consistently 1,000K (give or take) out from the official ones
6,500K: 5,500K
5,000K: 4,000K
5,500K: 4,400K
6,000K: 4,800K

Specifications

HD Ready: YES including 1080p24

Component video: YES one input

HDMI: YES 2 x HDMI v1.3

PC input: YES 1 D-Sub 15-pin

12V trigger: YES one output

Resolution: 1920 x 1080

Brightness (claimed): 1,600 ANSI lumens (claimed)

Contrast (claimed): 200,000:1 (claimed)

Dimensions: 450(w) x 145(h) x 390(d)mm

Weight: 7.5kg

Also features: ISF support; motion interpolation processing; HQV processing; sharpness boosting processing; dual-layer notched iris; DeepBlack optical technology; seven colour-mode presets; comprehensive gamma/colour adjustments; vertical and horizontal lens shift; RS232 serial port; 22dB quoted fan noise; 4,000 hour lamp life; 30-300in image; 2.1x zoom



HCC VERDICT

Epson EH-TW5500
£4,000 Approx

Highs: No-nonsense design; lots of features; easy and flexible to setup; produces the finest LCD pictures yet

Lows: More expensive than rivals; occasionally loses focus a little, requiring readjustment

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

The odd couple

In Panasonic's latest AV wonder, digital recording coexists happily with a bygone analogue era. **Martin Pipe** explains

For the benefit of younger HCC readers baffled by the picture below of Panasonic's new DMR-EX99V, take note: that large slot on the left of the front panel takes analogue VHS tapes. Yes, while it may cater for Freeview terrestrial digital and DVD, this Panasonic deck also connects with the old-tech past, by featuring a VCR.

The very mention of VHS makes many of us go all misty-eyed and nostalgic for the early 1980s, when VCRs were prized family possessions. The good news is that, with the EX99V, those vintage tapes lurking at the back of the cupboard can easily be transferred to DVD.

Get editing

First, though, you can dub them to the 250GB HDD. This'll let you

eliminate unwanted material, thanks to Panasonic's friendly editing functions, before copying what's left to blank DVDs. Discs/tracks can be named, and thumbnails and basic menus chosen, before the disc is finalised. Bingo.

What's also cool – especially if someone in the family is either not *au fait* with modern tech or merely charmed by the retro fuzzy chic of clunky VHS – is that HDD and (non-copyright) DVDs can be dubbed to tape. The VCR supports index search, hi-fi sound, NTSC playback/dubbing and SP/LP/EP recording modes, but lacks full S-VHS compatibility. Sure, it will play/dub such tapes, but with mere VHS quality. S-VHS users can, however, connect up their old VCRs to the front-panel AV inputs.

AV/CV

Product:
DVD/HDD/
VCR recorder

Positioning:
The better-
specified of two
new VCR
combis from
Panasonic

Peers:
Toshiba
DVRI9DT

Naturally, there's far more to the EX99V than its VCR talents. It's also a Freeview+ HDD recorder, upscaling DVD player and music jukebox.

It doesn't record Freeview's digital datastreams as broadcast directly, though. Instead they're decoded and then re-encoded by the machine's recording electronics. On the plus side, you can cram a lot more on the hard drive or DVD – but with a drop-off in AV quality.

Another niggly is the EX99V's timeshifting feature. For a start, the annoying onscreen graphic that appears cannot be turned off. What's more, you can't permanently preserve a recording that's in the buffer, should you decide it's a 'keeper'. But beyond that, I'm pleased with the EX99V's TV-related features: the GuidePlus EPG, which



can schedule the 32-event/1-month timer directly, offers a programme-search facility as well as basic categories; and 'auto renewal recording' means you need never miss another soap again...

The EX99V lacks a Firewire input for DV camcorders, but the USB port will accept footage from modern cams. The SD card slot allows playback and copying of JPEGs and MPEG-2 video, too. File support extends to MP3 music, and you can rip CDs to the hard drive, where an onboard Gracenote database will even attempt to identify your disc.

Setup

Owing to HDMI incompatibilities with my Onkyo AV receiver, I had to connect the EX99V directly to my TV, sound being carried to the AVR via optical digital (the only non-HDMI option that Panasonic gives you). I immediately discovered the machine pesters you with a 'new channels found...' message whenever it's started. Rescan and reboot, and the message persists! Thankfully, it can be turned off in the menus.

Freeview pictures were impressive, even after upscaling (which is available for all sources including VHS). Naturally, recording quality depends on which of the modes you've set. In the top (XP) mode,

Three of a kind:
The Panasonic can record to HDD, DVD and VHS

it's difficult to tell the recording apart from the original. As far as digital TV is concerned, though, the next rung down (SP) is probably an adequate bet. The third choice (LP) retains all of the source's detail, but is spoilt by blocking. **EP is best described as wobbly-matter swimming in a sea of artifacts.** Even VHS is better! On which subject, the VHS-to-digital dubbing facilities exceeded my expectations in terms of the picture quality. I expect Panasonic is using some very clever processing.

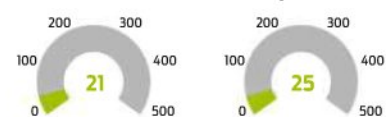
In all modes, sound quality is superb, and the jukebox facility uses linear PCM (no MP3 compression here) so there's no perceptible loss of quality relative to the original CD.

Old faithful

Okay, Panasonic's EX99V is a bit dowdy in terms of looks, and feels about as cutting-edge as rubber scissors, but it's still a very versatile, solidly-built machine that covers all bases (excepting S-VHS, maybe). However, Freeview datastream recording would give you the best possible AV quality. It's also annoying that the EX99V doesn't automatically play the next HDD recording – something Panasonics used to do. Oh, and finally, the machine can be very slow to boot up. A bit like an old VCR, in fact ●

→ Tech Labs

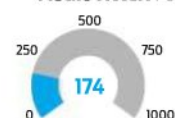
Power consumption: Watts



Idling: Not a high figure, considering everything that's on offer here

Playing: Spinning DVDs uses slightly more power (25W) than playing VHS tapes (23W)

Audio Jitter: Ps



Sound: An excellent audio jitter figure – better than some 'audiophile' CD players we've come across

Video Jitter: Ns



Vision: A fairly average result, but pictures are subjectively stable

→ Specifications

DVD Recorder: yes it writes to DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW and DVD-RAM

Dual-layer recording: yes

Hard Drive: yes 250GB (up to 441 hours recording)

DVB tuner: yes (but no analogue tuner)

Upscaling: yes to 1080p

Recording modes: 4 plus FR

MP3/JPEG playback: yes/yes

USB reader: yes

Memory card slot: yes SD

HDMI socket: yes with CEC support

Component output: no

DV input: no

Dimensions: 430(w) x 84(h) 346(d) mm

Weight: 6.1kg

Also featuring: Handset with multi-brand TV control; RGB Scart input/output; CD jukebox; manual chapter creation; divide/partial erase; high-speed dubbing; real-time dubbing to lower-quality mode, one-touch copying between VHS/HDD/DVD; GuidePlus (without STB control); automatic grouping of recordings; playlist editing; PCM audio recording option (for XP mode); 32-event/1-month timer; playback picture adjustment; digital teletext; Freeview+ certification; view DVD while HDD records



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMR-EX99V
£450 Approx

Highs: Excellent AV performance; sensibly-featured digital recorder

Lows: VHS-only VCR; no pay-TV upgrade path; no infrared control over STB

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



JVC returns to slender

The Japanese brand bravely tries to take its screen business upmarket with the LT-32WX50. **John Archer** finds out if it succeeds



JVC's XVIEW LT-32WX50 knows how to get your attention. Take its price, for instance: at a cool £2,500, it's phenomenally expensive for a 32in screen. No surprise, then, that JVC is looking to shift it through custom install channels rather than normal high-street outlets.

Also striking is the 32WX50's finish: a rather fetching deep grey aluminium with an optional industrial-style table-top mount and detachable speaker bar.

Comfortably, the 32WX50's most stand-out feature, though, is its truly stunning slimness. At its thinnest point it's just 6.4mm deep. That makes it a whole 3 and a bit mm – count 'em! – thinner than last year's Sony 40EX1 groundbreaker. Even the bottom third only 'balloons' to 25mm – still markedly slimmer than Samsung's iconic B8000 LED series.

The screen's slimness aids its custom installation ambitions too. For a screen this thin could be much more easily incorporated than a standard LCD TV into wall, ceiling and shelf AV systems, or fitted using, say, picture frames, railings, interior suspension units, or mirrored chests.

Whether the 32WX50's incredible slimness is enough to justify the screen's mammoth price depends on how design-obsessed/well-heeled you are. But I suspect that for most HCC readers, the 32WX50 will need to do more – so let's find

out what features the slender chassis holds.

No tuner

Connections wise, the only findings are two HDMI inputs, a PC RGB input, RS-232 control support, and USB/SD multimedia options. There's no tuner input, because there's no tuner in the screen! It's merely a monitor – which is, of course, entirely acceptable in custom installation circles.

The 32WX50's pictures are driven by JVC's latest picture processing platform, the New DynaPix HD engine. This includes a 12bit Real Bit Driver that enables upconversion of lower bitrate signals such as 8bit HD broadcasts and DVD signals to 12bit Deep Colour signals, resulting in smoother colour gradation.

Also part of the new DynaPix HD engine is a Chromaticity Point Conversion Circuit, designed to compensate for colour bleed and colour drift caused by gaps between the source colour format and the LCD's own colour space.

DynaPix HD now incorporates Intelligent Clear Noise Reduction processing, too, which detects and reacts to picture noise in each of a picture's 16 frequency areas, as well as Intelligent Colour Management, which uses a newly-developed algorithm to emulate how people are drawn more to the colours of key objects than they are the colours of surrounding objects.

AV/CV

Product:

A totally fine-tuneable 32in monitor with an ultra-slim profile aimed at the custom install market

Positioning:

Sits at the top of JVC's current screen tree, just above the similarly specified but not as thin 42WX70 model.

Peers:

Samsung UEB40B8000; Sony 40EX1

Next up is a new generation (version III) of JVC's Clear Motion Drive technology, delivering enhanced 100/120Hz processing as well as real-time, motion-estimated noise-reduction.

Another interesting ability of the 32WX50 is wide colour gamut coverage. The screen can tackle a full 100 per cent of the sRGB colour spectrum, and around 90 per cent of the Adobe RGB spectrum. This should let it reproduce digital photographs with unprecedented (in the TV world) colour accuracy. There's even a Photo Pro picture preset, designed for D-SLR stills.

Other presets include Game, Theatre, Dynamic, Standard, Monitor and even separate HD and standard-def CCTV options, plus digital signage and medical display settings for commercial applications.

As well as the aforementioned picture presets, you get six separate memory slots for storing your own settings. And among the vast quantity of things you can change are such niceties as the BY gain and BY/R Y angle of the hue setting; separate detail, horizontal and vertical sharpness adjustments; extensive backlight adjustment; colour matrix, temperature and space adjustments; white balance fine-tuning using 'Drive' and 'Cutoff' values for the red, green and blue colour elements; and comprehensive colour management.

This latter tool lets you adjust the colour and hue of the red, green, >

It ain't heavy... but it is rather expensive



→ Specifications

HD Ready: YES including 1080p24

Tuner: NO monitor only

Component video: YES via D-Sub adaptor

HDMI: YES two v1.3 HDMI inputs

PC input: YES one D-Sub

Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080

Sound: 10W

Brightness: 400cd/m2

Contrast ratio: 80,000:1 (4,000:1 native)

Dimensions (off stand): 772.4(w) x 496.1(h) x 22.5(d)mm

Weight: 5.7kg

Also features: 100/120Hz Clear Motion Drive III processing; DynaPix HD video processing engine; noise reduction routines; USB and SD inputs with JPEG compatibility; wide colour gamut screen with 100% sRGB and 90% Adobe RGB range; Gamma 2.2 pre-adjusted; Real Bit Driver; Intelligent Colour Management; 52 manual picture adjustment properties; edge LED backlighting



What a stunner:

Pictures are as ravishing as the design – some of the time

cyan, and yellow components, as well as the hue and colour of skin.

The problem with combining the 32WX50's exceptional picture flexibility with a £2,500 price is that if the picture quality the screen delivers is less than perfect, it's going to feel disappointing. And sadly, the pictures are less than perfect.

Box of wax

Why? First, the picture isn't as sharp as I'd like, especially when it comes to standard-def viewing. Skin tones look slightly waxy, and there's sometimes quite pronounced motion blur, no matter what settings you use.

My other concern is with the black level response. On paper the quoted 4,000:1 native and 80,000:1 dynamic contrast ratios look okay. But in action, the screen's edge-LED lighting system causes distracting light pooling in each corner.

The 32WX50 also suffers with some grey clouding over dark scenes, hiding subtle shadow detailing.

Frustratingly, its failings stand in stark opposition to some startling strengths. For instance, the sheer range of colours the screen produces is, for my money, unprecedented on a 32in TV. With skin tones in regularly watched Blu-ray sequences I witnessed subtleties of tone in different parts of people's faces that I haven't seen before at the 32in level.

Similarly, subtle blends like auras around planets and stars, or the varied shades of red in a sunset sky,

are delivered with extraordinary precision. This is striking with digital stills, where the detail, subtlety and accuracy of the 32WX50's colour rendition is simply exquisite.

The exceptional subtlety with colours is also used to render colours with uncannily accurate tones. Somehow this colour accuracy even extends to dark pictures, aside from the way deep blacks look rather grey.

While the 32WX50 might not be the greatest screen at suppressing motion blur, it is very accomplished at keeping a lid on judder, leaving images from all sources looking fluid and smooth – but not unnaturally so. The viewing angle is wider than that of most LCD TVs too.

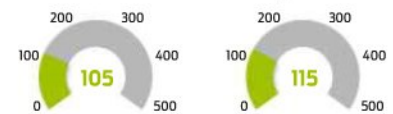
One last string to its bow is audio. For despite being as slim as the thickest part of the screen's slender form, the provided speaker bar kicks out much more clarity, volume, dynamism and soundstage size than most 32in LCD TV speaker systems.

There is much to admire about the 32WX50 – and I'm not just talking about its startling design. JVC has clearly poured its heart into making the 32WX50 a custom installer's dream, with no stone of set-up flexibility left unturned. And when its pictures are good, they're stellar.

That said, I'd hoped for almost flawless pictures for £2,500. Yet the 32WX50's backlight consistency and motion blur issues ensure that 'almost flawless' is certainly not where its pictures are at.

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Somewhat higher than average consumption for a 32in TV. The Eco feature cuts it by 15W to 90W

Test footage: A slight increase with movie playback and the supplied stereo speakers connected

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: Short of contrast claims in standard default mode. 'Theater' mode lowers the contrast ratio to just under 1,200:1

Colour accuracy



Preset: The seven preset modes cover a wide variety of white points, presumably to satisfy all the uses to which JVC expects this monitor to be put. Preset 6 is closest to the 6,500K 'ideal'; manual adjustment of R/G/B drive and cutoff are available for perfectionists
1: 16,000K
3: 11,500K
6: 6,000K
7: 3,500K



HCC VERDICT

JVC XVIEW 32WX50
£2,500 Approx

Highs: Jaw-dropping ultra-slim design; sound quality; terrific colour response and still image playback

Lows: Motion is a bit messy; backlight inconsistencies

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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YAMAHA RXV1065BL	£1599	£1199	£1799	£1339	£1299	£939		
YAMAHA RXV2065BL	£1949	£1649	£2149	£1849	£1649	£1449		
YAMAHA RXV3900BL	£2349	£1799	£2549	£1949	£2049	£1445		
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The 3D leader

The £350 BD-C6900 is Samsung's most advanced Blu-ray player yet.

Steve May wonders if there's more to it than just 3D

I subscribe to the theory that any disc player worth owning should have the demeanour of a battleship built by a Scottish shipyard. Rigidity foreshadows integrity, and tells me that a manufacturer takes the player as seriously as I take my media.

So Samsung's debut 3D BD player, the BD-C6900, is a challenge. Its almost impossibly slight frame (it's more kayak than cruiser) contradicts my world view, and teases me with a transparent lid and glimpses of my spinning discs. Yet I need to take it seriously. This BD player is the first of an advanced 3D Blu-ray breed. So will it float my boat?

Samsung has been a quiet leader in the Blu-ray world. It launched arguably the first player, the BD-P1000, and it's been aggressively raising the stakes ever since. Coincidentally, if you own a BD-P1000, this new model shares

the same remote control codes and you'll end up with mirrored actions if the two decks are berthed in the same room.

Okay, so we know it's compatible with next generation 3D Blu-ray discs. What else? Well, it exploits its Profile 2.0 internet connection to deliver extra IP content via Samsung's own Internet@TV portal, including BBC iPlayer, LOVEFiLM movie streaming, video clips on YouTube, picture browsing on Picasa and more.

The deck will naturally stream media from connected devices over a network. If you have a NAS (Networked Attached Storage), it will let you stream a selection and pull content from a PC. The player is DLNA-compliant out of the box, but you also have the option to install All-Share management software on your PC to enhance functionality.

The player is at its happiest when playing extraneous media from

AV/CV

Product:
3D Blu-ray player

Positioning:
The company's most advanced Blu-ray player yet

Peers:
Panasonic DMP-BDT300;
Sony BDP-S570

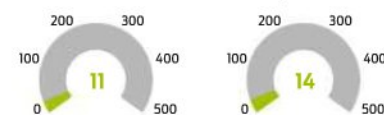
a USB stick. File support is good, although the deck's incompatible with FLAC or MPEG4 AAC audio.

Using the BD-C6900 is a lot of fun. The full-screen GUI is sharp (literally and graphically), with chunky icons for content types. You can even theme the background screen with one of five 'skins'.

One practical complication of 3D Blu-ray is that the HDMI v1.4 output on the player needed to deliver control codes to a compatible 3D screen. If you route it via an older AV receiver with HDMI v1.3 inputs (to get at the lossless audio soundtracks on Blu-rays), you'll lose the control codes at best, thereby causing your TV to go into a strop. So at first glance, to run hiccup-free 3D, you'll need to forgo lossless audio. To get around this, Samsung offers a full set of 7.1 channel analogue outputs on the back (fine if your amp has a matching set of inputs).

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: The deck's idling power consumption is minimal

Playing: When spinning a disc, it increases to 14W

Audio Jitter: Ps



Analogue: Very good audio jitter figure for slimline product like this

Loading: Boot/Java

Boot speed & tray eject

5s

Tray in to main BD menu

36s

Disc loading & Java: Samsung's 3D BD deck is fast to boot and load

→ Specifications

Upscaling: YES All resolutions up to 1080p

Multiregion: NO Region B Blu-ray and R2 DVD

HDMI: YES 1 x v1.4

Component: YES 1 output

Multichannel analogue: YES 7.1 phono outputs

Digital audio: YES Optical

SACD/DVD-A: NO/NO Neither supported

Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: YES/YES

Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: YES/YES

Profile 2.0: YES

Dimensions: 430(w) x 205(h)

x 43(d)mm

Weight: 1.8kg

Also featuring: Front-mounted USB; integrated Wi-Fi; network streaming; Internet@TV online content portal including YouTube and Picasa



Backside connectivity includes an Ethernet port, although the player has integrated Wi-Fi. Getting on a network and online isn't much hassle.

Samsung currently has no plans to bundle in Active Shutter 3D glasses, but these will be bundled with Samsung 3DTVs.

Another world

In use, the C6900 is pleasingly sprightly, thanks to a feature dubbed Ultra Fast Play. It can get an image on screen from Blu-ray considerably quicker than last year's models.

Despite the unit's lack of girth, image quality is very good.

There's some serious silicon beneath the hood of this player and regular Blu-rays look blisteringly sharp. Fine detail is excellent and colour reproduction is without compromise.

When fed with a 3D Blu-ray, you're asked to accept the 3D setting (as if the player doesn't believe its owner really wants to watch movies wearing 3D spex). But stick with it and you'll be rewarded with fun dimensional images. I used it with Samsung's 40in 7000 series LED TV and was seriously impressed by the depth.

Audio is a more intriguing. The menu system allows you to output over HDMI either LPCM, the original movie soundtrack re-encoded to PCM, or as a bitstream (the so-called 'audiophile' mode). I auditioned the player with two AVRs, Onkyo's TX-NR906 and Pioneer's Susano

Slim shady:

Samsung's latest foray into the cutting edge packs more than its lightweight frame suggests

SC-LX90. While the player was happy to be partnered with the Onkyo, things didn't go so well with Pioneer. I found that the unit was unable to lock and stream a DTS-HD MA bitstream, causing the display to flicker wildly. Similarly, when a Dolby TrueHD disc was played, the Pioneer ignored it, maintaining a dignified silence. It's difficult to know if it's either the Pioneer or the Samsung which needs a firmware update (until we know for sure, Pioneer AVR owners should tread carefully). Converting to PCM within the player is one practical solution. Denon AVR owners should be fine, as Samsung's UK Q&A labs test compatibility with Denon AVRs.

Slim but serious

Samsung's BD-C6900 punches above its weight, and convincingly undermines my general philosophical love for over-engineered disc players. Despite its slimness, there's all the necessary hardware onboard for the 3D Multiview Codec and picture processing engine.

Video quality is excellent, but the player is a little pedantic: I would argue for easier AV networking and more comprehensive file support. And while having analogue audio outputs is appreciated, twin HDMI's would be a more practical solution (provided sync between the two is kept) to maintain compatibility with HDMI v1.3 (and lower) AV receivers. Still, it remains an attractive first-round 3D player. It remains to be seen how others compare ●



HCC VERDICT

Sony BD-C6900
£350 Approx

Highs: Great video quality; fast loading; USB file support; 3D compatibility; better 'net content

Lows: Network streaming relies on PC content management software; some connection issues

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

A Fetching idea

Adrian Justins examines a Freeview+ PVR with some interesting add-ons



AV/CV

Product: Freeview+ PVR with IPTV services including BBC iPlayer, plus multimedia playback

Position: Fetch TV's only product

Peers: BT Vision+; Humax; Foxtat-HDR

Fetch TV's 160GB Freeview+ PVR packs numerous punches, including a networkable multi-media hub; Wi-Fi and wired internet; on-demand movies and TV. It's very similar to BT Vision, only you don't need to subscribe to channel packages or be a BT broadband customer. The ace up its sleeve, though, is the provision of the BBC iPlayer service.

The plasticky Smartbox tries to look more expensive than it is, without succeeding. The fascia takes its unobtrusiveness too far, as the only visual communication it offers is a grey LED that goes a paler shade of grey when the box is on. No handy channel numbers or record/playback indication.

The remote control leaves a lot to be desired, too. Tiny buttons and icons make navigating the onscreen menus a frustrating process.

Connectivity is better, though. All the main AV bases are covered, plus there are dual USBs and an Ethernet port. These act as conduits to a world of on-tap entertainment sourced either from your DLNA computer or via the web. And if you don't like wires you can use Wi-Fi.

Quick smart

Installing and setting-up the Smartbox is, annoying remote control aside, a fairly painless experience. I used the Ethernet to connect to my BT Home Hub and was soon able to establish an IP connection without any stress. Whilst not in the class of GUIs from the likes

of LG and Panasonic, the overall layout and design of the menu system seems logical enough.

As a Freeview+ PVR the Smartbox does a good job. The EPG floats nicely on top of the broadcast show and can be formatted in several ways. Recordings can be renamed and exported to USB. Playing back, the 100x quick scan mode makes a mockery of Sky's laboured 30x maximum. Playing photo, music and movie files from external devices works okay but you can't copy files on to the hard drive.

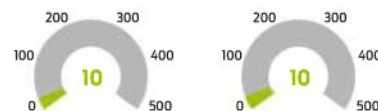
Fetch TV makes a big deal of its Catch Up TV service, but I found the selection less than compelling. Free content includes a variety of podcasts (big deal) whilst pay TV ranges from 99p documentaries to movies at £3.49 (viewable for 24 hours in a seven-day window). Tragically, the HD selection currently comprises around only five (indifferent) titles. The folder structure of the Catch Up part of the guide makes browsing a pain.

BBC iPlayer replicates pretty much the online version but annoyingly lacks HD support. Image quality is acceptable but **fast-forwarding can cause the box to crash** (possibly also due to BT's lamentably low broadband bitrate in my area).

Overall, this is a very good Freeview+ box with decent media centre functionality. But worryingly for Fetch TV it has no monopoly on iPlayer and the rest of its Catch Up TV selection remains rather unenticing ●

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: Using only 10W idling, the Fetch TV box shouldn't worry your energy supplier too much

Playing: Nor will it when playing back from its HDD. In fact, power consumption doesn't change

Specifications

HDD/PVR: YES 160GB
DVB tuner: YES (Twin DVB-T terrestrial tuners)
Upscaling: YES to 480p, 576p, 720p, 1080i
HDMI: YES
Scart: YES mini DIN-to-Scart out
USB: YES front and rear
Component output: NO
Stereo phono output: NO
Digital audio output: YES optical
Dimensions: 206(w) x 206(d) x 50(h) mm
Weight: 0.8kg
Features: BBC iPlayer built-in; CatchUp TV service; DLNA compliant media hub with Plug & Play home networking; wireless 802.11g; H.264 HD (MPEG-4), WMV9 HD, MPEG-2, MPEG-1 video playback; MP3, WMA9, MPEG-4 AAC LC & HE Dolby Digital & DTS audio playback; JPEG, TIFF, GIF, PNG playback from network or storage device



HCC VERDICT

Fetch TV Smartbox 8000
 £220 Approx

Highs: Solid Freeview+ box; iPlayer access; no subscription fees
Lows: Uninspiring content on Catch Up TV (especially HD); flaky IP delivery can crash box

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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Kelp is at hand

Martin Pipe thinks this 2.1 array will go down a storm with the IKEA squad



It could be argued that Samsung does for consumer electronics what IKEA does for housewares – it makes robust and good-looking products that everyone can afford. The HT-BD8200 system is one such product: a 2.1 Blu-ray soundbar system with a neat design.

One part of its appeal is its Blu-ray disc compartment, mounted between the soundbar's kelp fibre-coned speaker arrays. Press the top-mounted eject button, and a motor hinges it gently down forwards to reveal the vertical disc slot.

Then there's the 100W active subwoofer, a glossy black affair that could be mistaken for expensive home cinema gear. It actually goes one better by communicating with the main system wirelessly, so it can be placed in the optimum location without having to worry about wires. Apart from its mains plug, obviously.

There's no escape from wires elsewhere, though. In a recessed compartment on the rear panel, socketry includes the HDMI port, an Ethernet jack, a USB port, an optical digital input for external sources, a composite video output (why?) and aerial input for the FM-only tuner. On the side are further sockets for headphones, analogue audio input and the supplied iPod dock.

Like IKEA furniture, the BD8200 is designed for self-assembly. The main unit sits in a plastic desktop stand, but a pair of supplied brackets also allow it to be wall-mounted. This would be the practical and stylish option if you've wall-mounted your TV. Thanks to the integrated speakers and wireless sub, installation couldn't be easier.

The pleasantly-designed menus (and DHCP network autoconfiguration) don't hinder you. However, as with the HT-BD1255 system reviewed recently, speaker setup could be improved. There may be a noise sequencer, but it's not augmented by channel level adjustments. These are, however, provided in a separate menu. Thankfully, only three channels have to be adjusted here – against the BD1255's six. Other useful features include an AV sync delay and HDMI CEC.

Looks familiar

Visuals from Blu-ray discs and DVDs impress with their clarity, colour fidelity, and smoothness – I suspect the BD8200's disc player uses much of the same electronics as Samsung's highly-regarded budget models. The sound quality is also more than acceptable, and the sub can generate some pretty impressive SPLs, certainly in modestly-sized rooms. Those low frequencies are handled adeptly with less colouration than I've heard from other 'system subs', too.

Considering how close the speakers are in the 'bar, I was pleasantly surprised at the imaging. The virtual surround mode, engaged with the handset's 'V-Sound' button, is good, with sound seeming to come from behind.

For many, an AV system mounted on the wall under a flatscreen TV is the ultimate in designer AV chic, and Samsung's HT-BD8200 is a strong performer. Yet, it's no substitute for a full 5.1 setup, but for the 'lifestyle-orientated' customer, what's offered here is more than an acceptable compromise ●

AV/CV

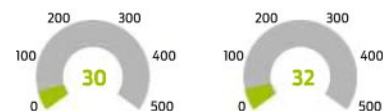
Product: 5.1 design-oriented Blu-ray soundbar with wireless sub

Positioning: Samsung's top 2.1 Blu-ray product

Peers: LG HB354BS; Panasonic SC-BTX70; Sony BDV-Z7

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling:

As expected, considerably more than a standalone BD player as the amp is also being powered

Playing:

Only a very slight increase in power consumption even with volume on full

Loading: Boot/Java

Boot speed & tray eject

14s

Tray in to main BD menu

50s

Disc loading & Java:

Long to boot up, but a speedy loader

→ Specifications

Video upscaling: YES up to 1080p
Multiregion: NO Region B (BD); R2 (DVD)
HDMI: YES 1 x v1.3 output
Component: NO
Multichannel phono audio: NO stereo inputs
Digital audio: YES 1 x optical input
SACD/DVD-A: NO
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: YES/YES
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD bitstream: YES/YES
Profile 2.0: YES if suitable USB memory device plugged in
Dimensions (system unit): 1,000(w) x 194.6(h) x 69.6(d)mm
Weight (system unit): 5.6kg
Also featuring: 1080p/24 mode; FM radio; iPod dock supplied; 100W active wireless sub; 100W per integral front speaker; MP3/JPEG/mkv/MP4/DivX/XviD playback via disc; YouTube playback; BD-Live (with USB memory); Anynet+; V-Sound; Wi-Fi upgradeable

HCC VERDICT

Samsung HT-BD8200 2.1
£550 Approx

Highs: Subwoofer surprisingly effective; picture quality; affordable
Lows: Mediocre music reproduction; photo playback never better than upscaled SD

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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Back up on Blu

LG's N2B1 offers the ultimate in content security, says **Steve May**

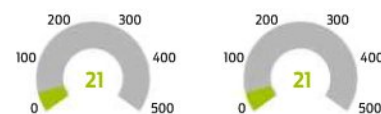


→ Specifications

Features: Built-in Blu-ray writer with disc burning from NAS; two-bay 3.5in SATA11 HDD; three USB 2.0, one e-SATA; Gigabit Ethernet support; CIFS/SMB, AFP, HTTP, FTP, Webdav network protocols; FTP server; USB print server; iTunes music server; Memory card reader (SD, MMC, MS, XD); auto sync function; DLNA compliant; RAID support for JBOD, RAID 0, RAID 1, RAID 0+1
Dimensions: 162(w) x 165(d) x 231(h)mm
Weight: 5.2kg

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: This is what the LG NAS will use when on and ready to go – standby power is less than 1W

Playing: There's no measureable power consumption difference when the device is streaming

LG's N2B1 is the world's first NAS (Network Attached Storage) box with an integrated Blu-ray writer. The benefit of this is obvious: you can quickly and easily archive off upwards of 50GB of files to Blu-ray media as and when you need them. However, this burner won't play commercial BDs or rip them to the drives.

The unit itself is well designed. The glossy white casing with black door means you won't immediately feel a need to quarantine it in a boot room, and there's a pop-up card-reader (SD, XD, MS) and USB in the roof for easy backups. In use, it's pleasingly quiet.

A peek around the back reveals a Gigabit Ethernet port, Kensington Lock, two 2.0 USBs and one eSATA connection. The USBs allow you to bolster storage with extra drives.

The N2B1 is reasonably straightforward to use, and the web interface is also one of the cleanest dashboards you'll find, although not as intuitive as I'd like. As a media server it's appropriately appointed, too. It can be UPnP-enabled, meaning that it can be seen across a network without further configuration by other UPnP devices, and has both

an iTunes server and integrated BitTorrent support in the shape of the lightweight Transmission client. On my network, I could stream files to an Xbox360 and PS3, as well as a Popcorn Hour HDX box and WDTV client, without problems.

Drive time

There's a variety of configuration options for the two drives. You can run them stripped for 2TB worth of space, a 1TB mirror or a combination of the two. The Selective Mirror mode allows you to specify which folders you want to back-up. Other niceties include a programmable hibernation mode – **instead of sucking juice relentlessly through the night, you can put the unit to sleep**, reactivating it when it's likely to be used.

Mac users will also be pleased to note the device supports Time Machine, the Apple back-up system.

Overall, the N2B1 is an attractive option for those who are looking for a versatile media server. Additional server support would have been welcome (I'm thinking that Twonky would have been a nice fit), but all in all this is a smart, fast choice for network AV fans ●

AV/CV

Product: NAS box with integrated Blu-ray burner

Positioning: LG's top-of-the range NAS product

Peers: Netgear ReadyNas NVX; Iomega StorCenter iX2



HCC VERDICT

LG N2B1 DD2 NAS
£380 Approx

Highs: Design; integrated BD burner
Lows: Not as intuitive as it could be; BD playback would have been welcome, as would more media server options

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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A 5.1 set of these MK Sound speakers
uses no fewer than 25 separate drivers

Feel the force

Adam Rayner ignores the fashionistas and fills his room with THX Ultra speakers with *Star Wars* approval

The only trouble with truly durable performance-bred professional items is that they don't need upgrading or replacing too often. Which might be why Miller & Kreisel, renamed MK Sound after a restructuring a while back, now sells regular consumer speaker systems. These S150 THX cabinets aren't to be underestimated, though; they're big boxes that sound rich, sweet, damned loud and breathtakingly dynamic.

In the jungle

The children's 'toon *Madagascar* is a great test disc, with the surround mix provoking a lovely sense of Africa, and this MK Sound array revelled in it. The susurrations of the grasslands and the night sounds were deliciously clean and divorced from the boxes, and I was immersed into the environment the sound designers created. That all the many zebras are voiced by Chris Rock is funny, and yet I could make out dozens of slightly different Chris Rocks chattering away during the herd scenes.

Cranked up, and it just got louder without any trace of stress or effort. The flashback sequence where Alex the lion is stolen and nailed inside a crate nearly lifted me off the seat with each hammer blow.

Now this has to be down to the incredibly efficient subwoofers I had on test. Although sold as a package with one MX350 MkII, HCC also auditioned a 5.2 set and, oh my, was it better than just twice the bass!

The sheer scale of *all* of the sound was immense – with four 12in drivers and around 750W of a power, the air-shifting ease is fabulous. The woofers pack their twin drivers in a push-pull configuration, so when one is all the way into its magnet gap and ready to shove violently back out, the other is at its mechanical limit and ready to spring back into the chassis. This offers both cones a degree of electro-mechanical support to each other and, with the lower driver's

acoustic loading (I reckon the bottom chamber is in fact a massively wide-angled ported device rather than simply an exit point) the result can de-bone you down to way lower than 20Hz. Blimey.

The rears are what MK Sound calls 'Tripoles', as they have a regular direct radiating midbass and tweeter on the front but also a pair drivers firing fore and aft, dipole style. These 3.5in cones are big enough to play mids but small enough to reach into high frequencies, and add the dipolar ambience that gives them THX adherence and a great snappy presentation.

And the fronts? Well, these big, sealed lumps are pig-ugly with their grilles off, as the designer has simply slapped a lump of foam on the front baffles to keep the three tweeters' outputs from interfering with each other close to the box. As the sound extends a bit further out, though, you get the synergy of all three tweeters added together, along with some real dark-arts stuff going on in the internal crossover department.

The resulting sound makes them professional grade – there's a set of these in the sound design and editing suites at Lucasfilm's Skywalker Ranch. **Rick McCallum, producer of the originally *Star Wars* trilogy swears by 'em, apparently.**

Décor dilemma

Anything good enough for Rick is good enough for us, but remember these are for dedicated cinema rooms only, where the lights are dimmed and you won't be able to see the speakers mounted on walls via their threaded bushings. As they only come in Henry Ford's choice of shades, they are meant to be heard and yet visually ignored. In normal living rooms, they'll look as domestic as a HumVee in khaki.

But if you're planning a full-on cinema install, do yourself a favour and audition this system ●

→ Specifications

MK Sound S150 THX L/C/R

Drive Units: 2 x 5.25in Polypropylene midbass drivers and 3 x 1in silk dome tweeters
Enclosure: Sealed
Frequency Response: 77Hz-20kHz
Sensitivity: Not quoted
Power Handling: 400W
Dimensions: 318(h) x 276(w) x 318(d) mm
Weight: 9.5kg

MK Sound SS150 THX Tripoles

Drive Units: 1 x 5.25in Polypropylene midbass driver and 1 x 1in silk dome tweeter, plus 2 x Ferrofluid-cooled 3.25in Polypropylene mid-tweeters
Enclosure: Sealed
Frequency Response: 80Hz-20kHz
Sensitivity: Not quoted
Power Handling: 200W
Dimensions: 203(w) x 267(h) x 165(d) mm
Weight: 4.6kg

MK Sound MX350 MKII subwoofer

Drive Unit: 2 x long-throw 12in drivers in Push-Pull configuration
Enclosure: Sealed
Frequency Response: 18Hz-200Hz
On board power: 350W RMS with proprietary Headroom Maximiser IV circuitry
Dimensions: 388(w) x 596(h) x 508(d) mm
Weight: 37.3Kg
Connections: Phono and three-pin XLR inputs

AV/CV

Product: Pro-audio derived and designed home theatre speaker system

Position: Top of MK Sounds product lineup, pretty much identical to those sold to the Skywalker Ranchers

Peers: Klipsch THX Ultra2; Teufel THX System 9 Ultra2; Snell Acoustics THX Ultra2



HCC VERDICT

MK Sound S150 THX Ultra £6,600 (5.1); £8,800 (5.2) Approx

Highs: Impactful, crisp, dynamic sound with great detail and accuracy; potent subwoofer

Lows: You don't want to see these undressed and grille-less. Heck, you just don't want to see these at all

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



ADVERTISEMENT



Seeing is believing

looking for a Home C

How easy is it to buy a home cinema system that suits you? You could read the magazine product reviews, find out who sells the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys at the cheapest price and place your order. When the system is delivered to your door in the box, you get a friend who knows his onions to install it - and live happily ever after.

This is a fairly well-trodden path but it leads to dissatisfaction and a lot of wasted money. Besides there being a bewildering choice of components on the market today, there are also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, plasma or LCD, an HD ready set or one with full 1080p capability? And on the audio side do you plump for a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub, and where do you site them for the best results? The choice of home cinema amp raises even more questions. Will you be listening to music through the same system? If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Do you need SACD, DVD-Audio, or Blu-ray capability? How many inputs do you need for video, s-video, component, coaxial digital, optical digital and HDMI? The above are just a small percentage of the decisions that must be made. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer.

This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that **the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis, that is without professional input, are performing at way below their optimum level.** To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity.

Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ... **don't** start with **WHAT**, start with **WHERE**. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit **you**.

“...without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity”

inema

LISTED HERE ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.

Listed on this page are 20 of the best AV shops in the country. They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY



SERVICE



FACILITIES



VERDICT



Buying or being sold to?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to

its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a nicer way of doing business than just handing over boxes.

system?..

...Ask the experts



OUR TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST AV DEALERS

SOUTH

Ashford, Kent SOUNDRAFT HI-FI

40 High Street. 01233 624441

Chelmsford RAYLEIGH HI-FI

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245

Colchester RAYLEIGH HI-FI

33 Sir Isaac's Walk. 01206 577682

Kingston-upon-Thames INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.

020 8943 3530

Maidenhead AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995

Rayleigh, Essex RAYLEIGH HI-FI

44a High Street. 01268 779762

Custom Install Dept.

01268 776932

Southend-on-Sea RAYLEIGH HI-FI

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255

Tunbridge Wells KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.

01892 535007

LONDON

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webb's Road, Battersea.

020 7924 2040

Ealing AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703

MIDLANDS

Coventry FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200

Nottingham CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way. 0115 9584404

Solihull MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road. 0121 742 0254

NORTH

Chester ACOUSTICA

17 Hoole Road. 01244 344227

York SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate. 01904 627108

SCOTLAND

Aberdeen HOLBURN HI-FI

441 Holburn Street. 01224 585713/572729

Edinburgh LOUD & CLEAR

Bonnington Mill, 72 Newhaven Rd.

0131 555 3963

Glasgow GLASGOW AUDIO

135 Great Western Road.

0141 332 2200/4707



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

You can't beat the system

Adam Rayner gets theatrical with a darkened room and the latest THX kit from Teufel



What we have here, in the shape of Teufel's THX Ultra2 System 8, is a set of speakers designed from the ground up to adhere to the excitement levels that George Lucas and Tom Holman decided were appropriate all those years ago when they formed THX. Of course, THX has evolved so much further. It's an independent company, and isn't resting upon Tom and George's laurels. Instead, it's

evolved and enhanced their concept, dividing it up into two levels for different sizes of rooms found on each side of the Atlantic.

The System 8 is the mid-to-highest level of THX Ultra2 kit that Teufel makes (the brand also produced **the world's first speaker set to adhere to this newest Ultra2 specification**) and, to put it bluntly, it is stonking.

Topless Teufel:

Whip off the grilles to get up close to the speakers' multiple drivers

I was so rude about a previous Teufel system's looks that one of the UK-based public relations team called me up to take me to task over what I wrote in the review... something about being hit with the ugly stick. But I reckon that's missing the point – all that a serious THX user cares about is the sensation and the emotion the experience brings. Shiny good looks were not part of Holman's original specification. ➤

AV/CV

Product:

5.1 system made to the latest THX spec but this time in a glossy upscale finish with Aluminium trim – posh!

Position:

An upper-class system for Teufel, as much of their product is aimed lower – but they go up to €5,000.

Peers:

Klipsch THX Ultra2;
Jamo THX Ultra2;
Polk THX Ultra2



82 REVIEWS

Indeed, I recall early JBL THX stuff looking like pro audio thuggery wearing a dinner jacket of black wood veneer. For me that was exciting. But I'm odd.

However, Teufel's System 8 is deeply sexy, as well as being able to raise the goosebumps on the performance front.

Sizable subwoofer

This £2,700 setup comprises two kinds of small boxes (the S 800 front channel speakers and the S 800 D dipolar rears), and one ruddy great lumpy box, the S 800 SW subwoofer.

Starting at the bottom end, the subwoofer is a simple application of physics. Massive cone plus massive amp plus massive deep-breathing slotted box equals room-shaking bass.

The S 800 SW is a big cubic beast with has a definite front and back. The behind has fins, a bunch of connectors for phono or speaker in and out (just in case you want, like, four of them...) and a single frequency knob to fix your crossover point between 40Hz and 240Hz. And that's your lot, because the woofer is supplied with a natty remote that does other functions – not many, but the ones that matter. For instance, press one button and you have the THX setting at the right gain. Or you can choose to alter the playing level with the gain up and down, and even choose to flip the phase from the remote. All this is monitored by a panel of LEDs in the sub's front fascia.

The exterior of the subwoofer is deliciously pretty and quite unsuited to a house as cat-filled as mine – I quickly got a lot of moggy-on-the-car-bonnet-looking

paw prints all over the deep lustrous piano black finish.

This same finish is applied to the other enclosures, which are quite smallscale for what they do. The rears are classic Dipoles, a bit less common now that many systems are so very discrete channel-capable. I'm less a fan of diffuse dipolar rears than I am of big in-your-face (well back of your head) direct radiating designs, but these are the real THX thing. They have a small bracket on their back as well as two stand-off rods at their bases to make sure they are correctly boundary loaded against the wall. Likewise, although you can get stands for the fronts, these also have a brace of hole-brackets on their rears to cater for wall mounting.

Each speaker has an interference-fit grille (called a 'grid' in the otherwise well-translated English manual), with the dipoles, of course, having two, hiding the tweeter and 4in midbass cone. Each dipole's rear face also has a bigger midbass driver that bumps the lower tones out.

I had to open up one of the S 800 FCR speakers as it rattled dully and didn't work. It turned out that a) these were the very first ever set off the production line and b) someone had probably dropped the carton and managed to snap the meaty internal passive crossover away from where it was secured to the back of the speaker terminal cup. I attempted to repair it, but **instead found myself on the receiving end of Teufel's brilliantly-efficient replacement service**. For, apart from the long trial period you are allowed in case you don't like them, having bought them at long range as it were, they

THX certification

'THX-certified audio products are designed to let you experience movies the way they were meant to be heard,' runs the blurb on the legendary company's website. If that's a philosophy you adhere to, then getting a THX-approved system (AVR and speakers) is recommended.

Teufel's System 8 THX Ultra2 is, as the name suggests, certified to THX's Ultra2 standard. This category is for products

that bring 'the cinematic experience to larger home theatres, 3,000 cubic feet in size, with a viewing distance of 12ft or

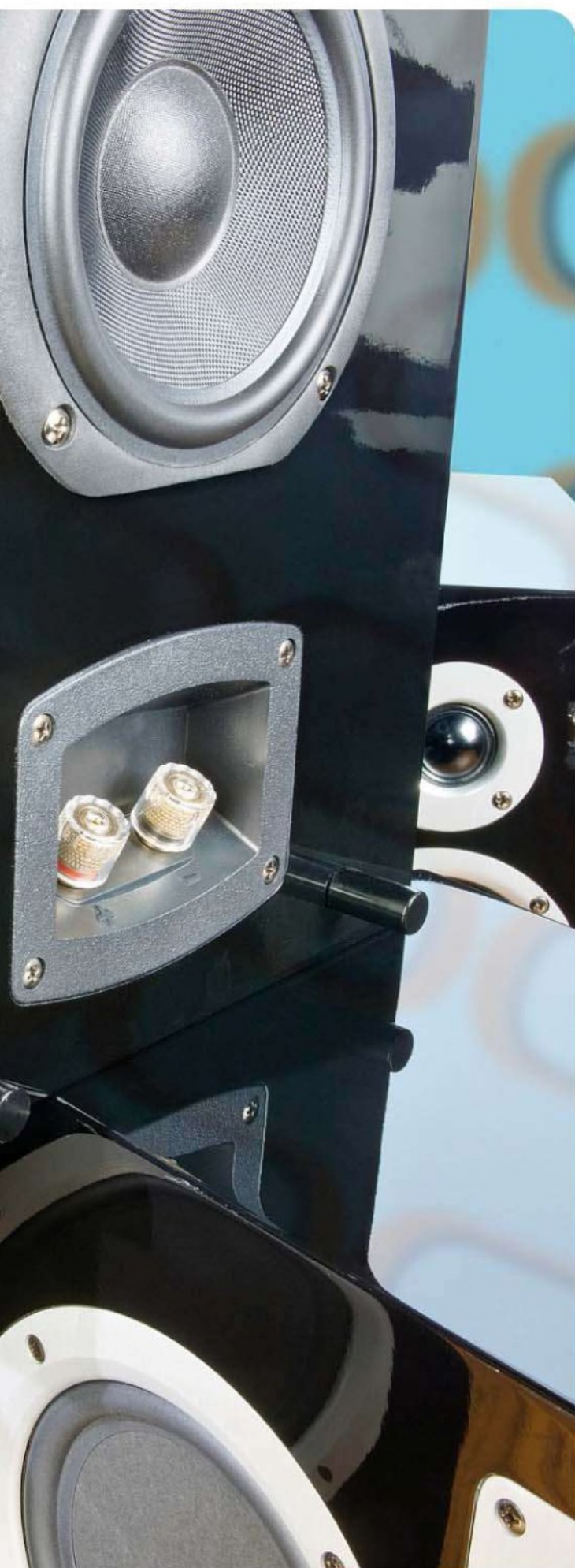


greater from the screen.' So if your cinema room is of that ilk, then the System 8 might be the setup for you. Of course, it will need to be partnered with a THX Ultra2-certified receiver, too – check out models from the likes of Onkyo, Pioneer and Yamaha.

If your viewing room is smaller, then you should instead turn to THX Select2-certified equipment, designed for space

up to 2,000 cubic feet in size, with a 10-12ft viewing distance from the screen. Teufel also makes speaker systems in this category.





have to be better than most at curing any issues, as they are a direct seller.

Opening up the FCR revealed that the big midbass drivers share an acoustically-damped internal space, but that the smaller midband driver has its very own cylindrical internal enclosure to play in. This keeps those hardworking-by-necessity 5.25in diaphragms pumping without beating up the smaller driver. It's a very neat piece of engineering.

Like the sub, all the satellites boast a lustrous piano black that does make them look desirable. And I love all the aluminium trim, too.

Up and away

As regular readers will know, I love a good bit of animation, not only due to often brilliant mix of Hollywood voices and top-end CGI, but the inventive surround soundtracks. For this test, I stuffed Pixar's *Up* into my latest acquisition – a Sony BD deck – lowered the lights and relaxed in front of my Panny plasma. I then, however, simply wallowed in what I knew would be a treat, making no notes! This is something that happens to AV reviewers from time to time.

Anyway, *Up* starts with a 1950s cinema newsreel, complete with a sonic overlay to convey the vintage feel. As the film goes on, different sonic challenges appear. The story involves a floating house, and is crammed with all sorts of action, but the really superb tester is the wonderful premise that if you tie enough balloons filled with helium to your house, it will fly. Now, the sound a balloon makes as it bumps against another in a bunch has as many mad overtones as pebbles scattered onto ice. There are all the squeaky sounds, obviously, but there're deep noises, too, as masses of enclosed gas bounce. This is quite deep if you have a few of them, and the bunch that raised the house was supposed to be huge. Teufel's System 8 set absolutely ate it for breakfast. It's detailed, beautifully balanced and rich with weight and scale – really impressive. The huge woofer can produce giant wave front explosions and the rest of the system is adept at placement and delicacy.

Teufel's System 8 THX Ultra 2 is an absolute treat, and I can recommend it unreservedly. It mixes top-grade performance with quality looks, and while its direct sale nature might not be everyone's cup of tea, its direct sale price certainly sweetens the deal ●

→ Specifications

Teufel S 800 FCR

Drive Units: 2 x 5.25in flat diaphragm midbass drivers; 1 x 3in flat diaphragm midrange; 1 x 1in soft dome tweeter

Enclosure: Three-way sealed, with separate sealed internal enclosure for midband driver

Frequency Response: 80Hz to 20kHz, -3dB

Sensitivity: 89.5dB

Power Handling: 140W

Dimensions: 238 (w) x 172 (h)

x 308 (d)mm

Weight: 6.1Kg

Teufel S 800 D dipolar surrounds

Drive Units: 1 x 5.25in midbass driver to fire against wall and on each end; 1 x 1in dome tweeter; 1 x 4in midband driver, five in each enclosure in total to form a dipolar array

Enclosure: Dipole, with wall stand-off rods and bracket

Frequency Response: 80Hz to 20kHz, -3dB

Sensitivity: 86dB

Power Handling: 80W

Dimensions: 238 (w) x 172 (h)

x 308 (d)mm

Weight: 6.1Kg

Teufel S 800 SW subwoofer

Drive Unit: 1 x 12in long-throw heavy duty

Enclosure: Slot ported with floor-loaded down-firing driver

Frequency Response: 25Hz to 200Hz, -3dB

On board power: 600W RMS Class AB MOSFET

Dimensions: 360 (w) x 557 (h)

x 700 (d)mm

Weight: 41.7Kg

Connections: Phono stereo inputs and outputs, and speaker-level in and outputs



HCC VERDICT

Teufel System 8 THX Ultra 2
£2,700 Approx

Highs: Full-fat cream of THX from squeaking balloons to big booms and in sexy shiny cabinets

Lows: Mail order speakers need to be tough and one arrived damaged – but mine were first off the line

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Think outside the box

Media players might not look like much, but they've become essential for digital entertainment. **Chris Jenkins** plugs in six black boxes >

WESTERN DIGITAL WDTV V.2

£100 Approx

An enhanced version of the original WDTV, this comprehensive and easy-to-use box kicked off the whole media player market

IOMEGA SCREENPLAY DIRECTOR HD

£170 Approx

The ScreenPlay Director HD is a serious bit of kit, capable of handling HD files of all types

A.C. RYAN PLAYON! HD MINI

£87 Approx

Very much aimed at the WDTV's market, this is also a budget device with no internal storage, though it does have networking features

THE TEST

If you have a PC and a TV, you have a problem. You probably have thousands of media files, from TV episodes to movies, digital still images and audio, in dozens of different formats, all filed away on your PC's hard drive (all legal of course, none of that nasty pirated stuff).

But you don't want to sit

hunched over your laptop in your office watching them – you want to enjoy them on your big TV in your comfy living room.

The media player is your solution. These boxes act as an interface between the wonders of the internet and the cosy familiarity of your TV. They're inexpensive, easy to use, and (usually) firmware updateable to take

account of future developments. The question isn't whether you need one, but: how are you going to manage without one?

In this group test we've concentrated on assessing the features and ease of use of these media players' operating systems. With this class of product, it's not external appearance that counts, it's what's inside!



EMINENT HDMEDIA STREAM

£120 Approx

The first device we've seen from this PC accessory specialist, the hdMEDIA Stream lacks a hard drive, but it does have a LAN port for network capability

ZYXEL DIGITAL MEDIA STREAMER

£115 Approx

ZyXEL's DMA-2500 features no internal hard drive but does have an Ethernet port for networking

A.C. RYAN PLAYON! HD

£135 Approx

This chunky beast adds the option of internal hard drive storage and some extra connections to the spec of the HD Mini

In most cases a media player would sit next to your TV, and have its own power supply, a selection of digital media inputs, and a selection of video outputs. When you download a file from the net to your PC, (or perhaps from a digital camera or camcorder), you transfer it to a USB memory stick or pocket hard drive, connect this to the media player, navigate to the desired file via an onscreen menu, and sit back to enjoy the performance on your TV and sound system.

Though they are without exception little black boxes, there are three main variations of media player. The most basic is simply an interface, with no internal storage – think of it as a device for adding a USB input to your TV. More advanced ones have their own internal storage hard drives, so you can use them as a 'media tank' with their own archive of material. The most sophisticated type also has

networking capabilities, so they can communicate with other devices on your local area network (LAN) – happily swapping media with other devices around your house.

Generally speaking, it's difficult to test media players in terms of conventional picture and sound performance quality – it's usually a case of getting out what you put in, though some players struggle to process HD video and multichannel sound. Perhaps more significant are factors such as ease of use, file format compatibility, upgradeability, and connectivity. So let's get plugged in and switched on...

Design

The AC Ryan PlayOn! HD Mini is solidly built and has no front-panel features except a power button. It doesn't have an internal drive either, so it's light, runs silently and requires only passive cooling. All the connection sockets are on the back.

It's supplied with a huge generic remote control which is longer than the player itself; it's no design classic, but you'll never lose it down the back of your sofa.

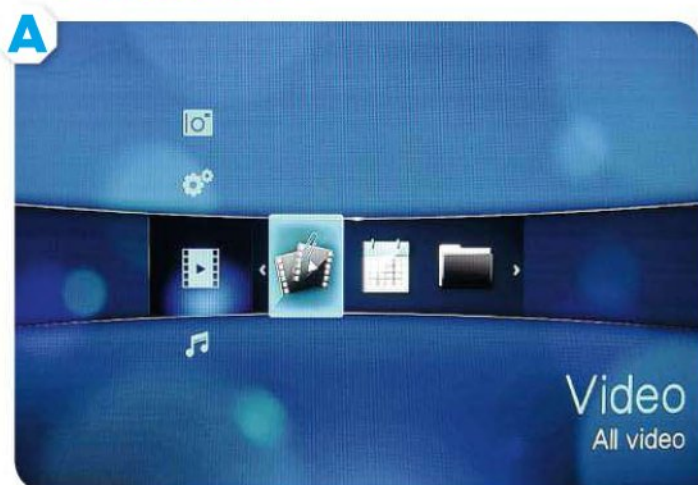
AC Ryan's more sizeable PlayOn! HD is another kettle of fish altogether, and can be fitted with an internal hard drive. On the side are an additional two USB Host and one USB Device ports, plus an SSD/MMC card slot. It's fan-cooled, and comes with a selection of leads including HDMI and USB, and another giant remote.

Measuring around 17x10x3.5cm, and lightweight as it lacks an internal drive, the Eminent hdMEDIA Stream looks a little 'budget', but seems solidly constructed. On the front are a handy USB port and a connector for an infrared sensor; all the other sockets are on the back. Cables including LAN and optical digital are provided, as is a neat, compact remote control.

WESTERN DIGITAL WDTV V.2

→ £100 Approx

→ www.wdc.com



In brief

Western Digital made an early and impressive start in the media player market with the WDTV and its networkable version, the WDTV Live. The WDTV V2 is an upgraded version of the original WDTV (which has itself been updated with several firmware revisions); again, it is a simple media 'dock' with no internal drive or networking.



IOMEGA SCREENPLAY DIRECTOR HD

→ £170 Approx

→ <http://go.iomega.com>



In brief

Iomega's history in the external hard drive market is second to none, but its track record with media players is chequered by slow adoption of new formats (one 'HD' model wouldn't even play HD files). The ScreenPlay Director HD makes a point of supporting HD formats such as H.264 and MKV, and features an internal hard drive of up to 2TB, making it a powerful 'media tank'.



Reasonably small for its specification, the Iomega ScreenPlay Director stands vertically and has an array of transport controls on the front, which are replicated on the mid-sized remote. Otherwise, all connections, including a Kensington lock socket, are on the back. An internal drive up to 2TB can be specced. Fan cooling is provided.

Lacking internal storage, Western Digital's WDTV V.2 is beautifully light and compact, and features only activity indicators on the front. Most of the AV sockets are on the back, and an additional USB is on one side. A small handset and cable selection is included.

Finally, the ZyXEL Digital Media Streamer can be laid flat or mounted vertically on its removable foot. All the controls and connections, including power, are on the back, and it comes with HDMI, LAN and AV cables, and a large remote control. Despite being almost as large as the

Iomega, this model has no internal drive and therefore no fan.

Features

Since all these products serve exactly the same purpose, it's no surprise that they have a great number of features and functions in common.

In terms of video connections, all have HDMI, composite video, and stereo audio outputs; the Iomega and AC Ryan units also have component video outputs. All have optical digital audio output, except the ZyXEL which has coaxial – the PlayOn! HD has both.

All have Ethernet LAN ports, except the WDTV; and all have USB 2.0 host ports – one on the Eminent and ZyXel, two on the WDTV and PlayOn! HD Mini, two plus a USB Device port on the PlayOn! HD, and three plus a USB Device port on the Iomega.

Four of the devices require you to use the 'sneakernet' – that is,

you have to carry media on a USB stick or pocket hard drive from your PC to the device. The built-in hard drives of the Iomega and the PlayOn! HD put them in a different category. Apart from being able to use them as media 'tanks' to archive large amounts of programming, you can also use them via your network as DHCP-compliant NAS media streamers, communicating with other UPnP compatible devices. They (and in a future update the PlayOn! HD Mini) can also be used as BitTorrent devices.

The WDTV V2 has several improvements over the original including video previews, file management and enhanced support for DTS sound in MKV wrappers. The Eminent allows you to play back Blu-ray ISOs from USB or networked storage, though unlike the PlayOn! HD it doesn't allow you to hook up an external DVD player. It has no internet streaming services but does support

AC RYAN PLAYON! HD MINI

→ £90 Approx

→ www.acryan.com



In brief

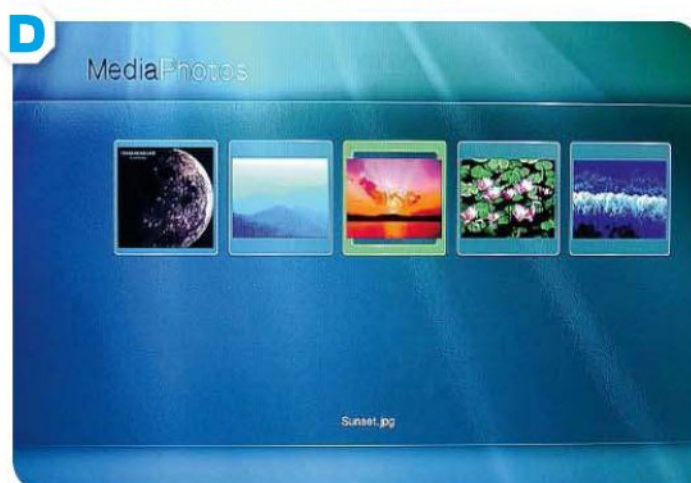
A new name to the UK, AC Ryan is well-established in its native Netherlands and in the Far East as a supplier of PC modding and drive hardware. The PlayOn! HD Mini is very much aimed at the WDTV's market, as it is also a budget device with no internal storage, but its provision of a LAN port makes it more comparable to WD's TV Live.



EMINENT HDMEDIA STREAM

→ £120 Approx

→ www.eminent-online.com



In brief

The Eminent hdMEDIA Stream is the first device HCC's seen from this PC accessory specialist. It has no internal storage, but does have a LAN port for network capability. If anything lets this device down, though, it's a lack of connectivity – just one USB port, and no component video output. It shares the WDTV's Advanced Sigma Designs 8655 processor, and has a similar GUI and remote control.



DLNA, UPnP, SAMBA, BitTorrent and NZB download.

The ZyXEL features built-in access to Web TV, YouTube and the Internet Radio Live365 network, which carries around 6,500 radio stations, but for some reason its HDMI output is V1.1 only.

The Iomega supports a USB Wi-Fi adapter sold separately for wireless access, can access online content from internet sites such as YouTube, and Flickr, plus internet radio, RSS feeds and podcasts, and comes with Iomega Protection Suite software.

The ZyXEL has a built-in Microsoft DRM-ND feature to enable playback of encrypted digital content, while the WD supports TS files and a selection of playlist formats. It won't support protected content such as movie and music downloads from iTunes.

The issue of file format compatibility is crucial, but of course these devices are designed in such a way that they can be updated from

the net. In general, you'll find that all of them handle common video formats such as AVI, MPEG-1/2/4, DivX, XviD, MOV, MP4, FLV, ISO and MKV at resolutions up to 1080p; audio formats including MP3, WMA, WAV, FLAC, PCM and OGG; image formats including JPG, BMP, GIF, TIF and PNG; and subtitle formats such as SRT, SMI, SSA, SUB and IDX.

Performance

So far as HCC is concerned, an unfussy, clear user interface with understandable, high-resolution icons and fast response to commands are the essentials of a good media player. Not all of our group test's contenders manage this.

The two AC Ryan units unsurprisingly have identical bright and clear user interfaces, which include previews of video files, while the WDTV V.2 is an enhanced version of the original WDTV, drawing something from Sony's PlayStation 3

in its XrossBar-style layout. Once you have browsed to the required folder, you have a choice of file display options including thumbnails of pictures and album art, and previews for video files. The Iomega has a very sharp menu display, but performance can be a little sluggish and options are quite limited; you can't search for files by artist or genre, and you can't display album artwork. But video file playback, even of HD material, is rock-solid.

The Eminent hdMEDIA Stream has a neat user interface similar to the WDTV's, and offers smooth, glitch-free performance.

Finally, the ZyXEL is let down by a scrappy, low-resolution user interface which responds slowly to commands; it also struggles with HD video files. Clearly its processor is underpowered, and while it's perfectly adequate as an audio player, we'd hesitate to recommend it for any video applications. ➤

ZYXEL DIGITAL MEDIA STREAMER

→ £115 Approx

→ www.zyxel.co.uk



In brief

Modem and switcher specialist ZyXEL has recently branched out into media players. The DMA-2500 is comparable to the Eminent's product, in that it features no internal hard drive but does have an Ethernet port for network connectivity. A decent audio player, the ZyXEL is let down by slow response, spotty performance with video, and a poorly-designed and low-resolution interface.



AC RYAN PLAYON! HD

→ £135 Approx

→ www.acryan.com



In brief

AC Ryan's PlayOn! HD is a step up from the Mini, as it can incorporate a storage hard drive. This makes it a much bigger and bulkier unit than the Mini, but also makes it possible to include additional USB ports. With prices ranging from £135 without a drive to £258 with a 2TB drive, it straddles the range of prices and facilities.



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Final Standings

If you don't already have a media player, you are going to want to buy one soon; the sheer amount of stuff on the internet that you want to view on your TV makes it a no-brainer. Okay, many TVs incorporate USB ports or SD slots, but they don't support the wide range of file formats and management systems you'll find on a media player. It's great that you can choose between inexpensive media 'docks', and more pricey hard drive-equipped 'tanks' depending on your needs, and whether you already have USB memory sticks, pocket hard drives and so on.

The other main factor to bear in mind when choosing a media player

is whether you will make use of networking facilities; even if you don't now, it's likely that you will find these functions useful in the future, and in a short time everything from your TV to your toaster will probably be networkable.

So far as this selection is concerned, the WDTV V.2 is probably the best choice in terms of value for money, comprehensive functions and ease of use. It's a pity it isn't networkable, but for that you would need to go for the Best Buy award-winning WDTV Live, which we reviewed last issue. Otherwise, networking oomph could be supplied by the AC Ryan or Iomega

products, and of course if you want internal storage the AC Ryan PlayOn! HD or the Iomega should suit you fine. The Eminent is simply undistinguished, while the ZyXEL has a poor interface and some video performance issues

And the winner is...

We've plumped for the AC Ryan PlayOn! HD as our winner in this group test, as it offers the best combination of connections, features, performance and value. Ryan has timed it just right and jumped in with a real pace-setter – but in this area you really have to run to stay in the lead... ●



1ST



HCC VERDICT

AC Ryan PlayOn! HD
£135 Approx

Highs: Good GUI; well specified; can be specced with a 2TB hard drive

Lows: Sizable in build; not much else

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES

USB: YES 2 x host, 1 x device

Composite video: YES Component Video: YES

S-video: NO Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES coaxial/optical

Ethernet: YES

Card slot: YES SD/MMC

Internal drive: YES up to 2TB

Dimensions: 227(w) x 60(h)

x 165(d)mm

Weight: 1kg

Features: Supports video formats AVI, MKV, TS, TP, TRP, M2TS, MPG, MP4, MOV, M4V, VOB, ISO, IFO, DAT, WMV, ASF, RM, RMVB, FLV, MPEG-1/2/4, XviD, DivX, WMV9, RealVideo; audio formats MP3, MP2, WMA, AAC, FLAC, WAV, OGG, PCM, LPCM, MS-ADPCM, LC-AAC, HE-AAC, COOK, RA-Lossless; Dolby Digital 5.1/DTS/DTS Master Audio passthrough & downmix to stereo; image formats HD JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIF, PNG. UPnP media streaming; wired and optional extra wireless networking; NAS functions; BitTorrent downloading; internet Radio; Picassa; Flickr; news internet feeds; photo slideshow

2ND



HCC VERDICT

Iomega ScreenPlay
Director HD
£169 Approx

Highs: Good GUI; well-specified; flexible

Lows: Can't search for files by artist or genre

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES

USB: YES 3 x host, 1 x device

Composite video: YES Component Video: YES

S-video: NO Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES optical

Ethernet: YES

Card slot: NO

Internal drive: YES up to 2TB

Dimensions: 76(w) x 185(h)

x 145(d) mm

Weight: 1kg

Features: Supports Video formats MPEG-1/2/4, AVI, VOB, DivX, XviD, H.264, WMV, AVCHD, VC-1, MKV, MOV, ISO; audio formats MP3, AC3, WAV, OGG, WMA, AAC (non-DRM), FLAC; image formats JPEG, BMP, GIF, PNG, TIFF; YouTube, Flickr, internet radio, RSS feeds, podcast access; optional WiFi; DivX Home Theatre Certified; includes Iomega Protection Suite anti-virus and backup software

3RD



HCC VERDICT

Western Digital WDTV V.2
£100 Approx

Highs: Beautifully light and compact; extraordinarily easy to use; XrossBar-style GUI

Lows: No networking or internal hard drive option

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES

USB: YES 2 x USB 2.0

Composite video: YES Component Video: NO

S-video: NO Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES optical

Ethernet: NO

Card slot: NO

Internal drive: NO

Dimensions: 125.5(w) x 40(h)

x 100(d)mm

Weight: 0.3kg

Features: Supports video formats AVI (Xvid, AVC, MPEG1/2/4), MPG/MPEG, VOB, MKV (h.264, x.264, AVC, MPEG1/2/4, VC-1), TS/TP/M2T (MPEG1/2/4, AVC, VC-1), MP4/MOV (MPEG4, h.264), M2TS, WMV9; Audio formats MP3, WAV/PCM/LPCM, WMA, AAC, FLAC, MKA, AIF/AIFF, OGG, Dolby Digital, DTS; image formats JPEG, GIF, TIF/TIFF, BMP, PNG; playlist formats PLS, M3U, WPL. Picture Transfer Protocol support, automatic file play, thumbnail, list and video previews, media library search and aggregator, slide shows



AC Ryan's PlayOn! HD is our group's winner

4TH



HCC VERDICT

AC Ryan PlayOn! HD Mini
£90 Approx

Highs: Good GUI; comprehensive functions; small form factor

Lows: Doesn't feature an internal hard drive; lacks an optical digital audio output

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES

USB: YES 2 x USB 2.0

Composite video: YES Component Video: YES

S-video: NO Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES coaxial

Ethernet: YES

Card slot: NO

Internal drive: NO

Dimensions: 151(w) x 42(h)

x 102(d)mm

Weight: 0.6Kg

Features: Supports video formats AVI, MKV, TS, TP, TRP, M2TS, MPG, MP4, MOV, M4V, VOB, ISO, IFO, DAT, WMV, ASF, RM, RMVB, FLV, MPEG-1/2/4, XviD, DivX, WMV9, RealVideo; audio formats MP3, MP2, WMA, AAC, FLAC, WAV, OGG, PCM, LPCM, MS-ADPCM, LC-AAC, HE-AAC, COOK, RA-Lossless; Dolby Digital 5.1/DTS/DTS Master Audio passthrough & downmix to stereo; image formats HD JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIF, PNG; UPnP media streaming, wired networking; wireless optional extra; download BitTorrent to external media (available in future firmware update); 'net radio, Picassa, Flickr, news feeds; picture slideshow

5TH



HCC VERDICT

Eminent hdMEDIA Stream
£120 Approx

Highs: Good file support; easy to use

Lows: Limited connections; no wireless support

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES

USB: YES 1 USB 2.0

Composite video: YES Component Video: NO

S-video: NO Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES optical

Ethernet: YES

Card slot: NO

Internal drive: NO

Dimensions: 175(w) x 37(h)

x 108(d)mm

Weight: 5.5kg

Features: Supports video formats XviD (SD/HD), MPEG-1/2, MPEG-4.2, WMV9, H.264, VC-1 MKV, AVI, VOB, ISO, IFO, DVR-MS, ASF (WMV), MOV (MP4 codec), DAT (VCD/SVCD); audio formats WMA, WMA Pro, AAC (MPEG 4), AC3 (Dolby), MP1/2/3, WAV, PCM, LPCM, FLAC; image formats GIF, BMP, JPEG, TIF, PNG; playlists PLS, M3U. External USB hard disk support up to 1.5 TB; built-in BitTorrent and NZB download client; IR connection, full DLNA, UPnP and SAMBA support; built-in Transmission and NZBget programs, file list and thumbnail modes, SD upscaling; slideshow functions; background music functions

6TH



HCC VERDICT

ZyXEL Digital Media Streamer
£115 Approx

Highs: Built-in Live 365 'net radio; S-video socket

Lows: Slow response; video playback issues

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HDMI: YES v1.1

USB: YES 1 x USB Host

Composite video: YES Component Video: NO

S-video: YES Stereo audio: YES

Digital audio: YES coaxial

Ethernet: YES

Card slot: NO

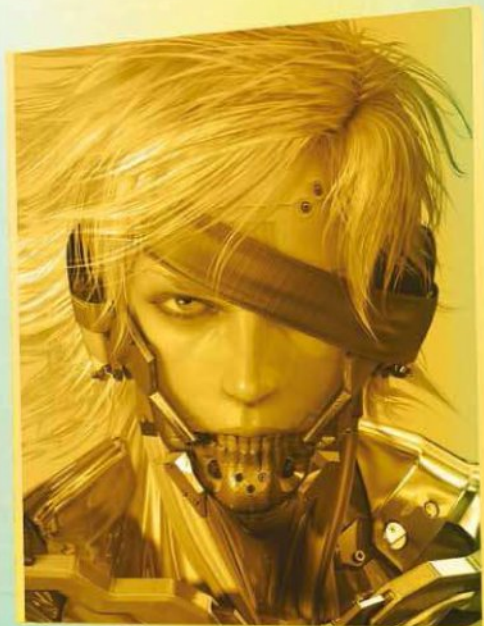
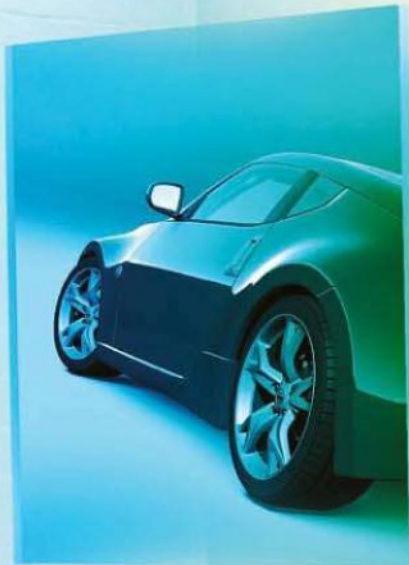
Internal drive: NO

Dimensions: 186(w) x 114(h)

x 38(d)mm

Weight: 0.4g

Features: Supports video H.264, WMV9, MPEG 1/2/4/SD/HD/VC1, DivX, Xvid, MKV, AVI, WMV, ISO, IFO, MP4, VOB, ASF, M2TS, MOV, TP, TS, MPG, DivX; audio MPEG 1 Layer 1&2, MP3, MPEG 2 AAC, MPEG 4 AAC, AC3, WMA, OGG Vorbis, LPCM, DTS Pass through, FLAC, AAC, AC3, WAV, PCM, MP3, OGG, WMA, MKA; Photo formats JPEG, TIFF, PNG, GIF, BMP; Subtitle formats SRT, SSA, IDX, SUB. Also supports NFS and SAMBA, Live365 internet Radio, optional wireless 802.11n USB adapter



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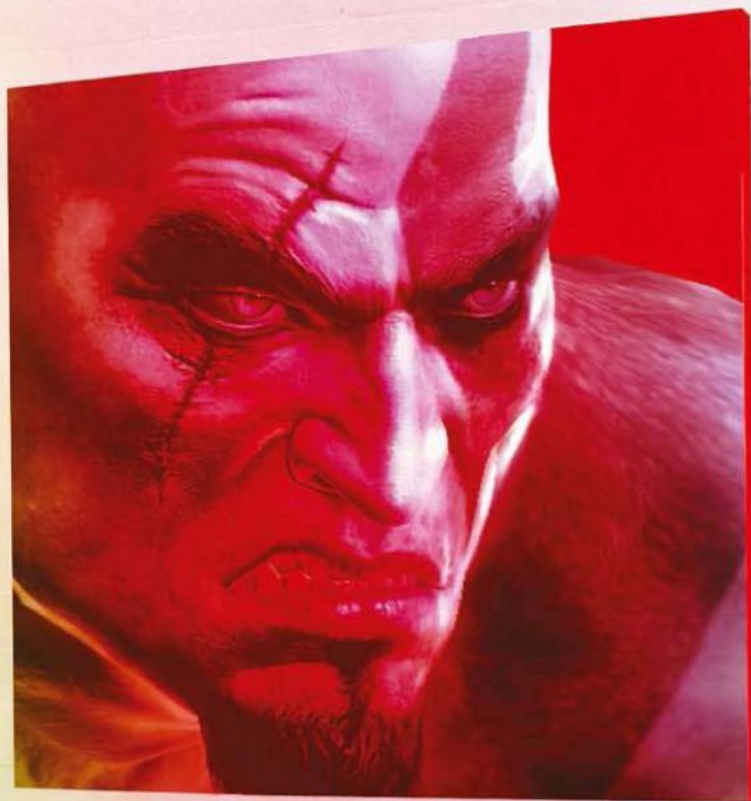
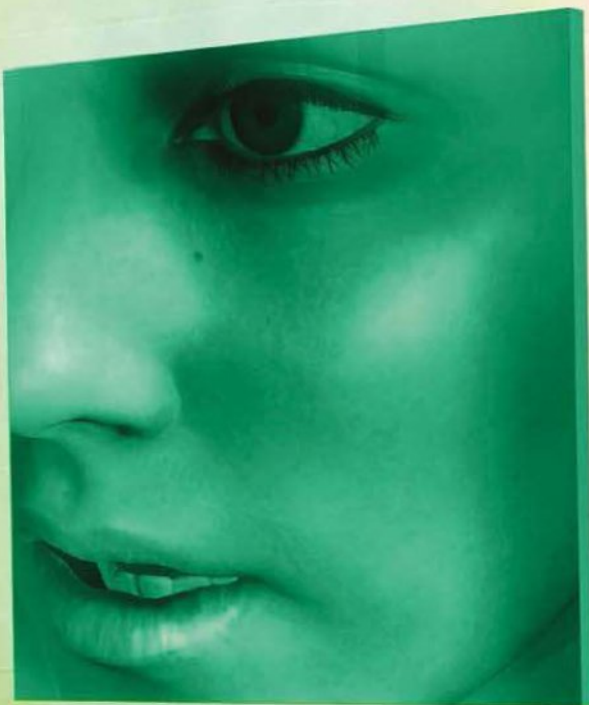
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Plug and play

Adam Rayner wrestles with a mass of wires and a Medusa of mains to taste the heady delights of a full-on professional system for the home...

AV/CV

Product:
Pro-level 5.1 system

Position:
AE's most compact monitoring system

Peers:
Genelec HT206B/HTS3B;
Dynaudio BM5A/BM9S;
Adam S1-A/Sub 8

Because my own roots are in pro audio I was glad to audition these professional active (self-amplified) monitors and subwoofer. Of course, you do get separate amps and speakers in the pro audio world, but this tends to happen only at the major level. This active satellite system is for nestling around mixing desks, but is so cute that Acoustic Energy was getting asked for them for home sales.

The AE22-10 ProSat marries a single midwoofer and a fabulously posh tweeter to a brace of differentially-sized channels of internal amplification. They bear a lot of the same DNA as Acoustic Energy's

AE1 speaker in performance, coming from the purity of a piston cone that's unforgiving, and not necessarily warm. As such, it's untiring to the ears for pro users who play them all day, and revealing of what their job needs them to hear – clinical detail with no power compression.

To send the signals from your AVR you'll need an umbilicus of professional proportions, like a mini multi-core at a concert, or a wrist-thick bunch of signal wires, as I had. Also, you'll need to supply mains to all five speakers as well as the subwoofer. In fact, installation took up about two thirds of my setup time, thanks to



D.I.Y.: The satellites' tweeters and mid-range drivers are powered by separate internal amplifiers



a set-up pack of 11 fully-terminated cables, plus the mains plugs.

I used my Acurus ACT3 processor as its purity is supreme and I reckoned it would be good at the 'pro' application, and fed signals from the back of a disc-spinner into it via coaxial. With a video connection to the TV, I had a full rig.

The speakers are utterly no-nonsense. Tiny 'dip' switches in their rears give you some crucial control, like phase and HF boost or depth cut-off, but that's it; no level control on the sub, no knobs on the speakers. It's just level-accurate to what goes in. You cannot boost it artificially as that'd be changing the flavour.

It's been emotional

In the event, my test period all got a bit emotional. I was flinging discs in and out of my player like a nutter to hear all my must-check tracks and clips. The simple fact is, these speakers, with their little amplifiers inside, are absolutely awesome. I played some bonkers DVD-Audio stuff called *Studio Voodoo*, and it was incredible; total clarity, believability and exquisite detail. The tweeters are god-like and the classic-AE-domed mids should

make the company's founder Phil Jones proud.

To test their mettle in a home cinema sense, I played some of the very beginning of Pixar's *Cars*. Lightning McQueen is giving himself a pep talk in his trailer, interspersed with ZOOM-NEOW! noises of the racecars on the track. Now, only systems of deep purity of detail-retrieval can make out the crowd sounds some 30dB down in that mix, but there they were. The bizarre thing was that I had heard them before, and better, but on a super expensive set of huge floorstanders.

And that's the point, these are professional-grade, easy to use and literally gorgeous to listen to. I could wax on about the taut control and depth of the bass, and more, but just believe me, this is amazing kit, and given how totally rapid and high-end the amps inside are, represents stupefying good value for money.

Yes, all the wiring involved is a bit of a pain in the neck, but you'll only do it once. And with the system up and running, I was blown away, to the point where I would happily consider swapping to active speakers and a sexy preamp. Wow! ●

→ Specifications

Acoustic Energy AE22-10 ProSat

Drive Units: 1 x 5.1in aluminium LF/MF driver; 1 x 1in ring radiator tweeter

Enclosure: Active, two-way sealed

Frequency Response: 100Hz-40kHz +/-3dB

Sensitivity: Not stated

Onboard power: 50W (LF/MF); 25W (HF)

Dimensions: 150(w) x 220(h) x 180(d)mm

Weight: 4kg

Connections: Single gastight Speakon connector for balanced or unbalanced input, plus single phono socket

Acoustic Energy AE22-08 ProSub

Drive Units: Two x 10in aluminium drivers with high-power long-throw motor systems

Enclosure: Sealed

Frequency Response: -6dB @ 25Hz

On board power: 200W RMS

Dimensions: 350(w) x 350(h) x 330(d)mm

Weight: 14kg

Connections: Six gastight Neutrik Speakon connectors for input and five XLR sockets for output



HCC VERDICT

Acoustic Energy Pro

Sub-Sat 5.1

£3,000 Approx

Highs: Breath-taking detail and tautness of the leading edges

Lows: Messy and complex cabling; very directional; small sweetspot

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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PLAYBACK

→ **Software highlights** **PARANORMAL ACTIVITY** The world's scariest Blu-ray? **TWIN PEAKS** Damn fine TV gets definitive DVD boxset **PONYO** Miyazaki works his hi-def magic 9 Living dolls brave the apocalypse in this freaky animation **TWILIGHT: NEW MOON** Vampires versus werewolves **LAW ABIDING CITIZEN** Gerard Butler gets his *Death Wish* on! **AND MUCH MORE!**

Phwoar!

Bitch Slap → R2 DVD

Are you ready to get wet 'n' wild with the crazy ladies from exploitation throw-back *Bitch Slap*? Turn to page 105 and take the plunge...



HCC Ratings key

Slimier	1	2	3	4	5
Jacob Marley	1	2	3	4	5
Sadako	1	2	3	4	5
Sam Wheat	1	2	3	4	5
Casper	1	2	3	4	5



'I'm not sure these water pistols are going to be enough'



HCC VERDICT

Law Abiding Citizen (DC)
Momentum Pictures → Region B
BD → £25 Approx

We say: Disappointing BD for a fun, if flawed action drama

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Citizens caned

A superior vintage of *Death Wish* with a full body count

Law Abiding Citizen offers an outlandish but entertaining mix of action thriller and social commentary. Gerard Butler plays bereaved husband Clyde Shelton, who brutally kills the men responsible for murdering his wife and child when they escape his idea of justice. Arrested for the murders, Shelton then starts to mete out revenge on those responsible for the original miscarriage of justice.

Superior to the similarly *Death Wish*-styled *Harry Brown*, *LAC* ups the ante in the action while doing a good job of exploring modern notions of criminal justice. But despite this, and excellent performances from the leads (particularly Butler), the film is a little too by-the-numbers in plotting and fails to find a satisfactory pay-off.

Mark Craven: Like the film's audio mix, there's nothing particularly exciting about *Law Abiding Citizen's* hi-def visuals. There's reasonable fine detail and subtle textures to be found in the AVC 2.40:1 encode, but away from the (very) occasional explosion the generally drab nature of the film and a handful of soft shots means that the lasting impression is of an adequate high-definition experience, but nothing more.

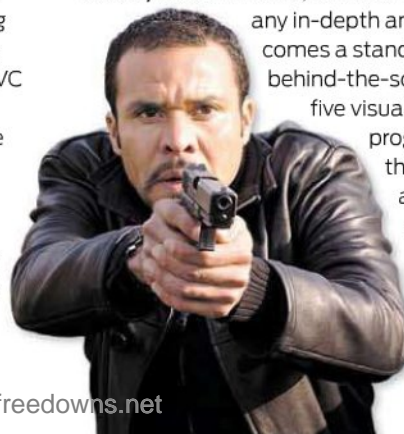
Steve May: Unlike Gerald Butler's spectacular assassinations, the Dolby True HD soundtrack employed here is a routine affair. A 5.1 mix, it

shows restraint for much of its running time, using the rears mainly for atmosphere and flybys – all very old school. Interestingly, it was only after the final credits rolled that I became aware of how undynamic the mix sounds. It really doesn't make anything of the extra clarity afforded by the lossless format, with a single exception that I'll not spoil here. Suffice to say the sonic crack is so deliciously violent and unexpected you'll jump like a startled kitten.

Anton van Beek: As much as I enjoyed the film, there's little of interest when it comes to the disc's supplementary features. Pick of the bunch is *The Justice of Law Abiding Citizen*, which looks at some of the more plausible elements of the film (and features input from real-life prosecutors), but at just six minutes, it's much too short for

any in-depth analysis. After this comes a standard 15-minute behind-the-scenes featurette, five visual effects

progressions, the theatrical trailer and an unexplained and absolutely abysmal trailer mash-up. A poor show.



The Men Who Stare at Goats

Momentum Pictures → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Based on Jon Ronson's book about US army paranormal experiments, this comedy stars Ewan

McGregor as a journalist who meets George Clooney's former 'psychic soldier'. Sadly, the truth is probably more interesting and funny than this predictable comedic fare. Though shot on 35mm film, this BD delivers a 1080i resolution AVC 2.40:1 presentation. We do get a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack, but it has little to work with. Extras include two commentaries, two featurettes, four deleted scenes, character-themed promo spots and the trailer. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Terry Gilliam's latest, and possibly most audacious, flight of cinematic fantasy is an utterly beguiling

Blu-ray experience. Lionsgate UK has done a fantastic job. The AVC 1.85:1 1080p imagery is a little drab in the 'real world', but once the film enters the *Imaginarium* it works wonders with the CG locations and effects, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix bustles with life. Extras are generous and include a chat track, deleted sequence, wardrobe tests, featurettes, a multi-angle FX deconstruction and an audio interview with the late Heath Ledger. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Caprica: Pilot

Universal Playback → Region 2 DVD
£16 Approx



Hungry for more Cylon action after the end of *Battlestar Galactica*? If you can't wait for the boxset,

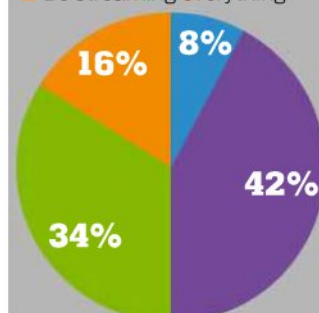
take a look at this feature-length pilot to Ron Moore's acclaimed sci-fi epic. Set 58 years before the parent series, *Caprica* deals with the creation of the Cylons, only with added religious terrorists, crime syndicates and virtual reality. While a hi-def version would be preferable, this DVD release holds its own with a well-rendered anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer and involving DD5.1 mix. Extras include a detailed commentary, seven minutes of deleted scenes and 13 minutes of Video Blogs. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

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Results of poll from
www.homecinemachoice.com

Budget ghostbusting

For all its craft, the 'home-made' look doesn't do Blu-ray justice

Paranormal Activity is a real Marmite movie. Like *The Blair Witch Project* before it, you'll either love or hate this ultra low-fidelity independent horror film. For our money, while it certainly doesn't live up to the 'scariest movie ever' hype, there's still a lot to admire about filmmaker Oren Peli's carefully-crafted tale of a young couple convinced that their home is haunted, who begin filming their bedroom at night to try and capture proof.

Mark Craven: It's hard to know how to score this Blu-ray encode on a scale of one to five. Shot using Sony's HDR-FX1 prosumer camcorder, the film is supposed to look like it is home movie footage – which means that it doesn't exactly offer the kind of 1080p imagery that many AV-fans crave. However, the AVC 1.78:1 encode is perfectly true to the source material, and any technical deficiencies are down to the source material rather than the disc itself, so you couldn't really ask for anything more.

Steve May: It's perhaps entirely fitting that the audio quality of a movie which is shot on camcorders sounds homemade. Predominantly monophonic with little in the way of surround ambience it's not a soundtrack that you'll be using to demonstrate your home cinema. This is not a criticism. The audio is entirely keeping with the conceit of the movie. Between you and me, the DTS-HD MA mix is a lot cleverer than it lets on. It effectively plays with dynamics and contributes enthusiastically to the film's scare quotient. That



Paranormal pornography leaves much to the imagination



HCC VERDICT

Paranormal Activity
Icon Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £25 Approx

We say: Hardly demo material, but this Blu-ray outing treats its source material with the respect it deserves

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 5
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

said, I can't see that the lossless mix offers significantly more than the standard DD5.1 version available on DVD.

Anton van Beek: This Blu-ray outing isn't exactly swimming in extras, but at least it's an improvement on the US release. The only thing that the two discs share is an alternate ending, which can be viewed either on its own or as part of the film. The UK disc adds the eight best shorts from the Film Your Own Paranormal Activity Competition, although they're rather oddly arranged so you watch Oren Peli's introduction, then the winner, then comes a menu screen with a list of the winners and a Play All option, which forces you to sit through the winning entry all over again. Best of all though is the UK-exclusive director's commentary, which spends the first half-hour or so discussing the film's production and distribution history, before settling down into the usual anecdotes and scene-specific chat – packed with plenty of useful information for aspiring low-budget filmmakers.

Still crazy after all these years

Age has not withered *Twin Peaks* – in fact, this boxset gives it a whole new lease of life

Twin Peaks is now 20 years old, but feels as groundbreaking and innovative as ever. David Lynch and Mark Frost's multi-layered and wonderfully weird whodunnit may have gone off the boil during its second season once we knew the identity of Laura Palmer's killer (although it came back all guns firing for the series finale), but even then it remained a singularly fascinating and original piece of primetime television.

Mark Craven: Remastered from the original negatives, with new colour timing overseen by David Lynch, *Twin Peaks* holds up as one of the best-looking TV series on DVD. Presented in the original 1.33:1 aspect ratio, the transfers are bursting with warm reds and browns, while detail holds up well for a 20-year-old series in SD. There's even a reasonable grain structure to be found in the image.

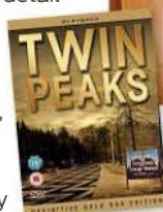
Steve May: Characterised by that haunting, classic theme, this deliciously weird series opens with a reworked multi-channel version of the original stereo mix. This partly explain the centre-locked dialogue and

limited directional logic. If the result is a Dolby Digital 5.1 affair that's less sophisticated than contemporary US dramas, it's uniquely worth experiencing.

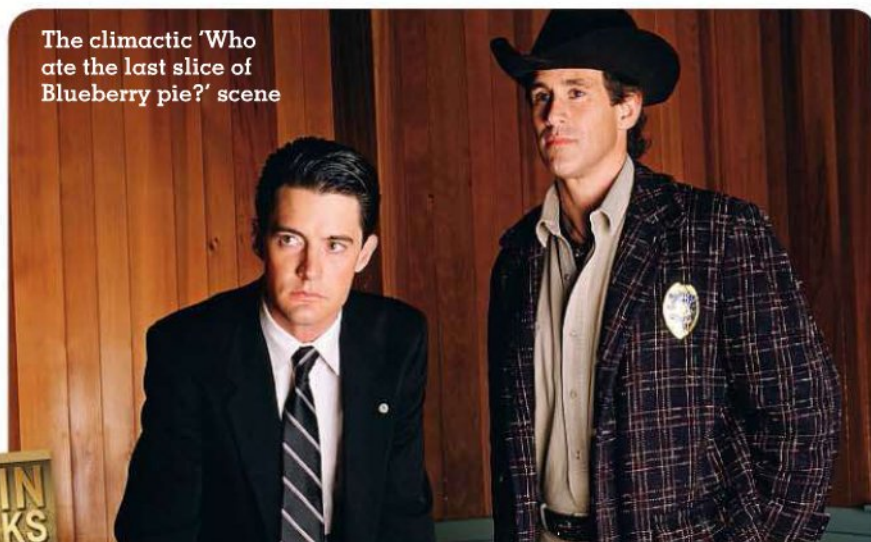
The omnipresent synth work in Angelo Badalamenti's score adds menace and fear, while the often slow, drawn-out vocal work contributes to a dream-like ambience.

Anton van Beek:

Despite the Definitive



The climactic 'Who ate the last slice of Blueberry pie?' scene



tag on this boxset, it's worth pointing out that some extras from the season releases are missing – most notably the commentaries, but there's still a lot here.

The first disc includes the Original and International pilots, while every episode features archival intro from the Log Lady. Disc Nine also offers a quartet of deleted scenes and a gallery of Production Documents. However, it's Disc Ten that offers up the real goodies. Here you'll find a 30-minute chat with Lynch and collaborators, an excellent 106-minute four-part retrospective documentary, two *Saturday Night Live* segments, an interactive map, a look at the *Twin Peaks* fan festival, a music video, three extensive image galleries, 12 promos, eight 1-900 Hotline audio messages and six episode bumpers.

HCC VERDICT

Twin Peaks: Definitive Gold Box Edition → Universal Playback Region 2 DVD → £70 Approx

We say: Not as definitive as it claims, but still a damn fine boxset

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 5
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



Who Dares Wins

Arrow Films → AR BD
£25 Approx



An SAS film may have seemed like a good idea in the wake of the 1980 Iranian Embassy Siege. Many

of us remember the exciting climax, which here draws on real footage, but few will enjoy the turgid 110 minutes leading up to it. As bad as the film is, we're pleased to see such a low-profile title on Blu-ray. Sadly, while a serious step-up from earlier versions, the AVC 1.85:1 encode still looks rather dull and flat. Extras include a commentary, documentary about producer Euan Lloyd, an archival TV show about the making of the film and a DVD copy of the movie. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

Give 'em Hell Malone

Momentum Pictures → R2 DVD
£20 Approx



This Thomas Jane (HBO's *Hung*) vehicle promises a lot – it's a *Sin City*-esque bloodthirsty film noir

– but ultimately falls flat thanks to an overcomplicated plot and some one-dimensional villains. Violent, but lacking charm and direction. The DVD is no great shakes, either: the extra features menu takes you to just a trailer, and the anamorphic 2.35:1 transfer is short of detail and colour punch. The Dolby Digital 5.1 mix is better, partly because it has a lot of gunfire and squealing car tyres to work with, but the score is atrocious. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

The Shinjuku Incident

Cine Asia → All-Region BD
£25 Approx



Coming across like an Asian *Once Upon a Time in America*, Jackie Chan's star dives into more

dramatic material as an illegal immigrant in Japan rising up the ranks of the local mafia. With no fights or extreme stunts, Chan relies on his acting and does a credible job, despite the meandering story. It looks great thanks to an AVC 2.40:1 encode that makes the most of the neon-lit Shinjuku streets, but the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is pretty tame. Extras include trailers, TV spots, eight behind-the-scenes featurettes, a *Making of...* and seven interviews. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Ong Bak: The Beginning

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£23 Approx



It's been seven years since Thai martial arts star Tony Jaa burst on the scene with *Ong-Bak*. He's now

dropped the hyphen and turned back the clock for part 1 of a saga that crosses Robin Hood with *The Jungle Book*. While the story isn't much cop, the action is still breathtaking and that's what we came to see. Sadly, Jaa's Blu-ray debut isn't as exciting as we hoped, thanks to a murky AVC 2.40:1 encode. Also there's no lossless audio option, just plain old DD5.1, and some meagre extras (behind-the-scenes footage, interview snippets and trailers) **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5



Little boys with bad haircuts can be very cruel



Like a fish out of water

Master animator Hayao Miyazaki takes to the water in his latest classic

Ponyo is the latest animated masterpiece from Hayao Miyazaki, the legendary creator of *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro*. *Ponyo* takes Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* as its starting point, but gives it a typically eco-themed Miyazaki spin by focusing on a magical fish-girl who runs away from her undersea home and meets a young boy. Transforming into a young girl, Ponyo loves her new life – but unwittingly offsets the equilibrium between land and sea, threatening to destroy the entire world.

Mark Craven: Disney has worked wonders with this Blu-ray edition of Studio Ghibli's latest, delivering a mouth-watering AVC 1.85:1 encode, any frame of which could hang as a work of art on any animation fan's wall. It's a flawless hi-def presentation, dripping with vibrant colours and crisp, clean line work. No matter how hard I looked I couldn't find a trace of technical anomalies anywhere in the image, be it edge enhancement or even the colour banding that often afflicts animated material. Quite simply perfect.

Steve May: I'll confess to being somewhat frustrated by *Ponyo*'s audio. For reasons best known to Disney, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is reserved exclusively for the American dub. The



original Japanese language track is relegated to standard DD 5.1 – it's not even the more capacious DD Plus. Perhaps there isn't enough room on the disc? Whatever, I felt cheated, and for that hereby deduct a point from its audio score. That said, the DD5.1 Japanese track is good enough, and both versions sound delightful, thanks largely to a magical score by Joe Hisaishi. Miyazaki's regular contributor, Hisaishi creates plenty of majestic, hummable compositions that ooze charm.

Anton van Beek: As usual with Studio Ghibli releases, *Ponyo* arrives with modest if pleasing features. There's a BonusView picture-in-picture mode letting you watch the film with (beautiful) storyboards playing out in a window. *The World of Ghibli: Behind the Studio* opens up a collection of featurettes looking at the production of the film, and *The World of Ghibli: Enter the Lands* is tailored towards younger fans and provides simple interactive features promoting many of the studio's other titles. Rounding out the package is a trio of short featurettes originally created for the recent R1 DVD reissues of *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *Castle in the Sky*, plus a BD-Live link and a DVD copy of the film. >



HCC VERDICT

Ponyo → Walt Disney HE → All-Region BD (US import) → £20 Approx (www.movietyme.com)

We say: Stunning visuals ensure this is an HD splash

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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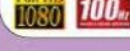
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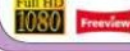
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E & OE HCC/Issue 180

Girls, girls, girls

This low-budget exploitation flick gets a delightful DVD debut

Bitch Slap delivers exactly what its poster art promises – three hot women in skimpy clothes throwing punches and blowing stuff up with ludicrously over-sized guns. It's an unapologetic tribute to the golden age of exploitation cinema, with a self-aware and spirited script that has masses of fun with the deliberately OTT dialogue and genre clichés.

Mark Craven: Despite its grindhouse affectations, *Bitch Slap* is as pretty as a pole-dancing princess. Shot with Red cameras, the 'scope ratio image pings with digital clarity, delivering a feast of high-contrast eye-candy. The colour palette is delicious, with every hue amped high: oiled skin tones glisten in the desert sun and blood runs postbox red. Even in standard-def, this dazzles.

Steve May: Listening to *Bitch Slap* is like playing *Guitar Hero* in a lap dancing club. The sound design revels in outrageous directional pans (jump 16 minutes in to 'I call that Shock and Awe' to check your speakers are working), has a rollicking music track and delivers explosive ordnance. If you're looking for a Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack to impress your mates, this is it.

Anton van Beek: It appears this R2 DVD features the original theatrical cut of the movie, not the slightly longer 'Unrated' version that is

Mel shows off her deadly weapons



scheduled to appear on the R1 DVD. And, presumably because of this, Momentum has ditched the two audio commentaries that have been announced for the US release. Thankfully, alongside the trailer, we get *Building a Better B Movie*, a fantastic 94-min *Making of...* documentary.

HCC VERDICT

Bitch Slap → Momentum Pictures
R2 DVD → £16 Approx

We say: Despite losing a few extras on its trip across the Pond, *Bitch Slap* looks great and packs a punch on DVD

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Johnny Got His Gun: Special Ed

Arrow Films → R2 DVD
£16 Approx



Dalton Trumbo's haunting and iconic anti-war film is released as a Special Edition DVD

complete with a 16-page booklet and quality extras – including Metallica's thrash-tastic video for *One*, inspired by the film, and an hour-long documentary. The stereo 2.0 audio is sparse and somewhat trebly, and the anamorphic 16:9 picture (which switches between black-and-white and colour) suffers from occasional print damage and a generally drab appearance – but I expected that from a film of this vintage. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

Day of the Dead

Arrow Films → All-region BD/R0 DVD
£25 Approx



Following hot on the heels of Arrow's impressive Blu-ray treatment of *Dawn of the Dead* comes this

HD version of Romero's follow-up.

While it doesn't make for an eye-popping HD experience, this UK BD outing is a clear step up from previous DVD incarnations. Thankfully, both the mono and DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks are both uncensored (unlike the latter on the US release, which was missing some dialogue) and there's a plethora of extras including a commentary by the FX team, an interview, documentaries and more, plus stylish packaging, a booklet and comic. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Survival of the Dead

Optimum → Region B BD
£20 Approx



George Romero delivers what is sure to be his most divisive zombie flick to date with his latest

low-budget outing. Foregrounding black comedy and his socio-political intentions, the film is never boring, but surprisingly it seems that the tiny budget has worked against him for a change, resulting in a movie that lacks the epic scope it needs. Disappointingly, this Blu-ray is completely lacking in extras. The AVC 2.35:1 encode is fine, if prone to some dull colour presentation, but at least the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is rather involving. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Twilight: New Moon

E1 Entertainment → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This second instalment in the popular supernatural romance franchise deserves credit for

being a slightly more cinematic experience than its predecessor, and benefits from an impressive BD outing. The AVC 2.40:1 encode is detailed and colourful, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 makes the most of the Emo music, mumbled dialogue and bass-heavy lycanthrope footsteps. A cornucopia of extras includes a commentary, PiP track, six-part *Making of...*, deleted/extended scenes, a sneak peak at the next film and more. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Glee: Season 1 Volume 1

20th Century Fox → R2 DVD
£28 Approx



Musical drama and primetime television have a history of not working well together. Remember

Cop Rock? Still, *Nip/Tuck* creator Ryan Murphy has done the impossible, melding the two formats together perfectly. *Glee*'s songs are catchy, the performances strong, and there's a delightful bitter edge to the comedy. This four-disc set features the first 13 episodes with attractive anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and DD5.1 audio. Sadly, while the extras menu looks comprehensive, most are clearly short promo spots made for US TV. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Doctor Who: The Space Museum/The Chase

2entertain → R2 DVD
£30 Approx



Those remarkable chaps at The Doctor Who Restoration Team have worked their magic once

again, managing to make a silk purse out of two Hartnell-era sow's ears with this latest boxset. These stories are pretty bad, but 2entertain's three-disc set has been lavished with care and attention. The restored imagery is as good as ever, while a galactic collection of extras includes commentaries, documentaries, archival 8mm footage of the Shawcraft modelmaker's workshop and more. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Elizabeth/Elizabeth: The Golden Age

Universal Pictures → All-Region BD
£20 each Approx



These entertaining if not always historically accurate accounts of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I

are definitely worth revisiting on Blu-ray. Both 1080p 1.85:1 encodes hold up very nicely, with the richly detailed HD imagery making the most of lavish costumes and locations, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes deliver an involving soundscape – particularly during the Spanish Armada sequences in the sequel. Extras include director's commentaries for both films and some interesting featurettes. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

M

Eureka Entertainment → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Fritz Lang's 1931 masterpiece about a child killer haunting Berlin is a welcome addition to the

Masters of Cinema line of classics revisited on Blu-ray. It's lost none of its power to grip over the eight decades since it was made, and this HD release ensures that Lang's sophisticated 1.18:1 imagery looks superb. Even the DTS-HD MA 2.0 soundtrack impresses, despite the odd pop and hiss, thanks to the improved audio clarity. Great extras include a pair of chat tracks, a 48-page booklet and, most intriguingly of all, an alternate 1932 British version with Peter Lorre's first performance in English. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Sack to the future

These living dolls are creepier than the Cliff Richard song

9 is an ambitious animated feature that sadly never quite measures up to the sum of its parts. Produced by Tim Burton and Timur (Night Watch) Bekmambetov, it follows the travails of a group of living sackcloth dolls as they try to discover their purpose in a dystopian world, where humanity has been wiped out in a war with machines. It's dark and freaky stuff, full of interesting ideas and striking visuals, but even with its short running time, you'll wish as much time had been spent on the predictable narrative as on the film's look and feel.

Mark Craven: Thanks to the likes of Pixar and DreamWorks, I've come to expect sensational things from CG animated features on Blu-ray – and the great news is that *9* is no exception. While there is slight banding evident in a handful of shots, it's nothing to get too worked up about, and in every other way the VC-1 1.85:1 encode is a thing of beauty – remarkably detailed and full of colour.

Steve May: There's nothing raggedy about the audio on *9*. The DTS-HD MA mix is rolling with incident and excitement, offering a 5.1 mix that's totally immersive. The sound design adds substance and believability to Shane Acker's apocalyptic world; often dwarfing our heroes with its scale while the LFE channel clunks and thuds with zeal. The movie essentially comprises a lot of stuff blowing up, which translates to considerable deep bass malice. Early encounters with The Beast, all screeching metal and feline fury, set the



HCC VERDICT

9 → Universal Pictures
All Region BD → £25 Approx

We say: An absorbing BD package means this offbeat 'toon is worth checking out

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

tone. As a counterbalance, Debbie Lurie's score (with thematic contributions from Danny Elfman) is fulsome. The lossless track revels in her orchestrations and calls out for repeat listens.

Anton van Beek: While the film itself didn't click for me, this Blu-ray's package of supplementary features are rather engaging.

The PiP track is one of the best Universal has produced; packed with interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, commentary, animatics and storyboards, it provides a fascinating and detailed study of the making of the movie. Equally strong is the chatty audio commentary by writer/director Shane Acker, animation director Joe Ksander, head of story Ryan O'Loughlin and editor Nick Kenway. You also get the original 11-minute animated short that inspired the film, four featurettes and five deleted scenes, plus D-Box Motion Code, My Scenes and BD-Live functionality.

SEVENoaks

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HOME CINEMA & HI-FI

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LCD & PLASMA SCREENS

SAMSUNG

SERIES 7000

40 46 55

Introducing the first of Samsung's new 3D-ready HDTVs. The 40" UE40C7000 is an edge-lit LED-based model.

The 3D technology used on all Samsung's 3D TVs is the 'active shutter' variant (also known as alternate-frame sequencing), powered by RealD, which requires the use of '3D Active Glasses'. The technology works by first blocking the left and then the right lens to deliver alternating images to each eye to create the illusion of 3D depth.

NEW

Samsung **LED TV**
Next Generation TV

3D

PANASONIC

PLASMA G20

42 46 50

This highly specified new range of Plasma TVs, available in three screen sizes, feature Panasonic's NeoPDP plasma panels for breathtaking performance - whether you are watching movies, sports or gaming.

Features include Freeview HD and Freesat HD tuners and a contrast ratio of 5,000,000:1 for extremely robust blacks.

NEW

PHILIPS

42PFL9664

This award-winning TV features built-in Wi-Fi web access, full HD, 200Hz motion smoothing and with a cutting edge 1ms response time. Native contrast is 80,000:1, although the new Ambilight Spectra 2 rear-projecting coloured LEDs are claimed to give a further 'perceived' improvement in contrast. And at only 49mm thick, the '9664 is easily wall-mountable.

46PFL9704 40PFL9704

DLP PROJECTORS

EPSON

EH-TW5500

Designed to bring outstanding quality to a budget-conscious home cinema enthusiast. The projector features full HD (1920 x 1080) resolution and a 20000:1 contrast ratio.

NEW



OPTOMA

HD20

HD82

These new full HD DLP projectors from Optoma combine great performance with outstanding value for money.

BLU-RAY DISC PLAYERS

NEW



PANASONIC

These new Blu-ray disc players blend comprehensive features, super-fast booting with superior sound and stunning HD-quality images. Coming soon: DMP-BDT300 Full HD 3D Blu-ray disc player.

DMP-BD45

DMP-BD65

DMP-BD85

DENON

Enjoy Blu-ray disc as it should be: Denon's range of players deliver high-end picture and sound quality.



DBP-1610

DBP-2010

DBP-4010UD

PIONEER

Get the most out of your movie experience with the luxuriously designed BDP-LX52. With a solid front aluminium panel, ice blue illumination and aluminium pre-set remote control, the player presents the best in both form and function.



BDP-320

BDP-LX52

SONY

Sony's range of Blu-ray players includes 'Product of the Year' - BDP-S760 and 'Best Buy' - BDP-S360.



BDP-S360

BDP-S560

BDP-S760

BDP-S5000ES

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HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

DENON

Denon's A/V amplifiers and receivers continue to impress with the AVR-1910 being christened 'Product of the Year' and the AVR-2310 awarded best A/V receiver between £500 and £1000 by What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision magazine. The numerous other five star reviews underlines the spectacular quality of the Denon range.

AVR-1910 AVR-3310
AVR-2310 AVR-4310



SONY

Sony's range of A/V receivers comprises both entry-level and audiophile models. The state-of-the-art 7.1 channel 'S400ES' is built with the latest audio and video technologies and delivers a breathtaking performance. The on-board menu system ensures effortless set-up and operation.

STR-DA5400ES
STR-DA2400ES
STR-DH800

YAMAHA

Yamaha A/V amplifiers and receivers are packed with features, offer excellent sound and represent outstanding value.

DSP-Z7 RX-V765
RX-V565 RX-V1065



PIONEER

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VSX-919AH SC-LX72
VSX-LX52 SC-LX82



HOME CINEMA SPEAKER PACKAGES

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PLATINUM



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Q Acoustics' engineers demanded unrivalled sonic performance and breathtaking value. With the award-winning 2000 Cinema Pack, their designers have surpassed themselves making it the natural choice for both home cinema enthusiasts and discerning music lovers.



SILVER RX6 AV12

Using techniques and materials from the Platinum and Gold ranges, the Silver RX series of slimline home cinema and hi-fi speakers are available in a choice of real wood veneers and high-gloss piano finishes to complement any room.

RADIUS



B&W

These award-winning packages combine style with excellent sound.



MINI THEATRE MT-25

MINI THEATRE MT-30

KEF



KHT3005SE

Building on the strengths of the EISA award-winning original 3005 package, the KHT3005SE is an extremely high performance, yet room-friendly, 5.1 speaker package.

KHT2005.3

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Pioneer VSX-LX52
£799 (RRP £999)
Pioneer SC-LX82
£1499 or less! (RRP £1899)

SCREENS

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Panasonic TX-P50S10
£749 or less!
Samsung UE40B8000
£ SSAV.com
Philips 42PFL9664
£ SSAV.com

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£ SSAV.com (RRP £999)
B&W MT-25
£969 or less! (RRP £974)
Monitor Audio Radius R90 HD10
£1269 or less! (RRP £1272)

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NAD C545BEE
£315 or less!
Arcam FMJ CD17
£ SSAV.com
Cyrus CD6 SE (2010)
£925 or less!

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£299 or less! (RRP £299)
Arcam FMJ A18
£ SSAV.com (RRP £619)
Cyrus 6 XP
£925 or less! (RRP £925)

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How we test

Home Cinema Choice's hardware reviews combine the subjective opinion of our seasoned reviewers with hard technical data.

Chris Jenkins explains how the HCC Tech Labs work

HCC reviews tend to be a mixture of subjective opinion and objective data. While we value the subjective opinions of our highly experienced reviews team, we like to blend and balance their opinions with objective measurements. The HCC Tech Labs have been measuring AV equipment for nearly 20 years. It was originally conceived to evaluate the performance of VCRs and CRT TVs, and it is now routinely testing Blu-ray players and HD displays.

Interestingly, much of our first generation hardware is still in use (we maintain an irrational fondness for an oscilloscope used to determine the onset of clipping on amplifiers), although our more venerable hardware is now supplemented by new software and measurement methodologies. One thing remains unchanged though: our commitment to supply you with the best possible buying advice.

Virtual Tour

Our Tech Labs consist of two main facilities: a Viewing Room, and a Test Lab.

The Viewing Room is used mainly for testing TVs, projectors and speakers and has been designed to reproduce the conditions that are found in a typical mid-range home cinema setup. It was created by award-winning custom installers Pounds (www.poundstv.co.uk), and is completely light-proofed. While it is not designed to be sound-proof, it has been skinned in Acoustiblock and has been acoustically treated and tuned by the experts at RPG (www.rpg-europe.co.uk), using custom absorbers and diffusers. The room features multiple HDMI, component video and audio cable runs, as well as analogue and digital TV and satellite feeds, and has a resident 7.2

speaker system. Multiple screens can be fed the same source material simultaneously, courtesy of a Gefen 2-in-4-out HDMI switcher/splitter, for screen shootouts.

Number crunching

The Test Lab is used mainly for number-crunching DVD/Blu-ray players and amplifiers. It's equipped with two industry-standard systems: a Tektronix VM700 video data analyser, and an Audio Precision APX585 multichannel audio analyser. Using standard test signals from discs and signal generators, these two systems are used to measure factors such as audio and video signal jitter, frequency response and output power. These give us a good general idea of the component quality, processing power and overall performance of players and amplifiers.

Professionals at large

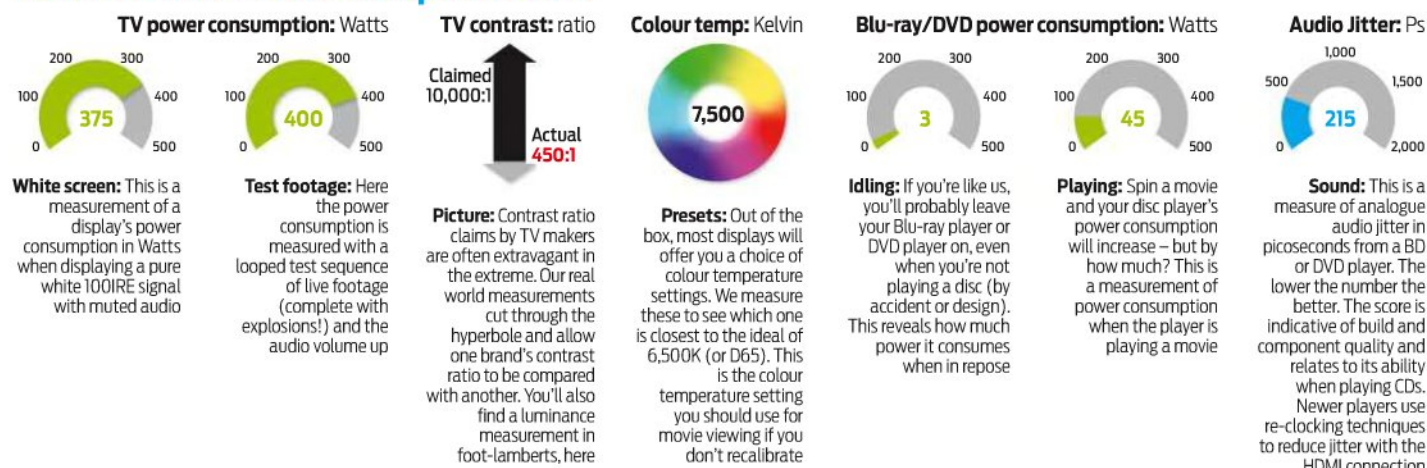
Over the years, our testers have been trained in calibration and testing techniques by the ISF, Tektronix, the Home Acoustics Alliance and other industry bodies. In short, when you read a review in HCC, you can be sure that the reviewer's subjective opinion is backed up by objective scientific lab testing.

Understandable and useful

One of our pledges is to present information that is both understandable and useful, for example, exposing the hype perpetrated by some makers of plasmas and LCD TVs regarding contrast ratios. To determine real world contrast, as well as measuring colour temperature presets, we employ a Sencore VP401 signal generator alongside a PC running Datacolor Colorfacts software with a Spyder 2 sensor. We use the Sencore signal generator and our own discs to generate standard TV



Tech Lab tests explained





Test bench:

Equipment from the likes of Snell & Wilcox, and Tektronix allows us to compare all manner of kit

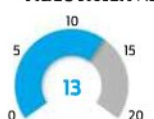
signals. Colorfacts analyses the colour and luminance performance of TVs and projectors, giving us information in areas such as contrast ratio, colour temperature and luminance.

Playback

Increasingly, you've been asking for more information on power consumption, and so we've now moved these

results to a headline position on our tests. We've also developed a more graphical presentation (key below) of some of the data we produce, which should make the facts more relevant and digestible. Not all the data we generate is published (frankly, you'd be bored) but all of it goes into the melting pot of opinion. While one key reviewer is bylined for our tests, as many as four team players will contribute to our findings ●

Video Jitter: Ns



Vision: This is a measure of video jitter in nanoseconds from a BD or DVD player. The lower the number the better. The score is indicative of build and component quality. We also present figures for Chroma Crosstalk (another quality indicator) and frequency response @5.8MHz

Loading: Boot/Java

Boot speed & tray eject
15s
Tray in to main BD menu
45s

Disc loading & Java: Blu-ray players can be notoriously slow to load and play discs, thanks to the DRM and Java content of BD software. These timings are crucial to the user experience – naturally faster is best

AVR power: Watts

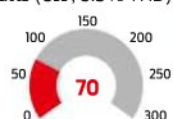


Powered: When you fire up that big AV receiver to watch a new movie you may be surprised to learn just how much current it's drawing. This is one of two measurements we take for AV amp power consumption. The other is when the AVR is powered up but idle

Amp output power: Watts (8Ω, 0.5% THD)

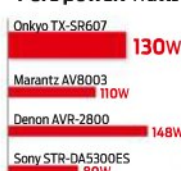


2-channel 8Ω: So just how heroic is that AVR you've been saving for? Putting aside paper claims, we measure its output in two-channel stereo mode. Also noted here is a figure for Total Harmonic Distortion



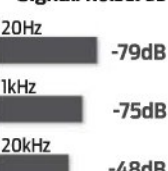
5-channel 8Ω: In most cases, an amplifier's muscle will be diminished when it runs in multichannel mode. We push the product to extremes in a 5.1 configuration to see how much grunt is available with all channels driven

Pure power: Watts



Fidelity firewall: This is our measurement of power untainted by distortion (typically 0.052THD, 8Ω, 1kHz). It's an indicator of both power output and component quality

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: These amp measurements reveal the ratio of noise to signal at a specific frequency. Readings taken at low, mid and high points help determine imaging clarity and sonic character

Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Want to comment on current technology? Need to share? **HCC** is here to help

Virgin needs work

I was gutted when the Sky installer told me that the line of sight from my house to the satellite was obscured by trees. I waved goodbye to Sky HD, picked up the phone, and made the dreaded call... to Virgin Media. Now I have the most unsightly lump of black plastic sitting in my AV rack making irritating clicking noises as it accesses its HDD at what seems like random intervals (even when in standby)!

Determined to make the best of a bad situation I sat down and spent a good few hours getting to grips with the V+ box. I was surprised with what I found – tons of on-demand programming from the main UK terrestrial providers as well as premium content from other channels in my package, all just sitting there buried in the menus – lots of it in HD, too! Playback was absolutely flawless, no visible picture artefacts even on my 52in Sony TV.

So am I happy with the service? No. The problem is that it takes so long to hunt through the menus to find what's available (waiting a few seconds after pressing a button on the remote for the box to react) that I just don't bother. The TV guide is just terrible – there's just no decent method for seeing what's on the channels you're interested in – let alone browsing by genre. Even changing channels takes an age. What's the point in delivering all of this content to me – content that Sky isn't even capable of – with no user-friendly way of accessing it?

Acquiring TiVo boxes, then, for Virgin Media is therefore the best strategic move Virgin can make. If TiVo is as good as everything I read about it, then



finally I might get to watch all of the content that I am paying for!

Anonymous, via website

All valid points, but it'd be interesting to know whether you have the Scientific-Atlanta set-top-box or the new Samsung-made V+ HD model. In our experience, the Samsung box is a lot faster and quieter in operation, so

Virgin Media is phasing out the old one. Of course, the TiVo box (due later this year) will be a game-changer in the pay-TV market for a number of reasons, so you might want to hang on anyway.

Going to Cambridge?

I have been a subscriber to your mag for many years and I regard it as the 'bible' when considering upgrades to my AV systems. I do, however, have a high regard

Cambridge Audio:
Not excluded from the AV bible

for equipment manufactured by Cambridge Audio because (a) it's a British-based company and (b) it tries to get it right when it releases a piece of kit, and it's not quickly superseded by a newer model. It's most frustrating when you plump for equipment by the leading brands, only to find within



AV elitists make my blood boil

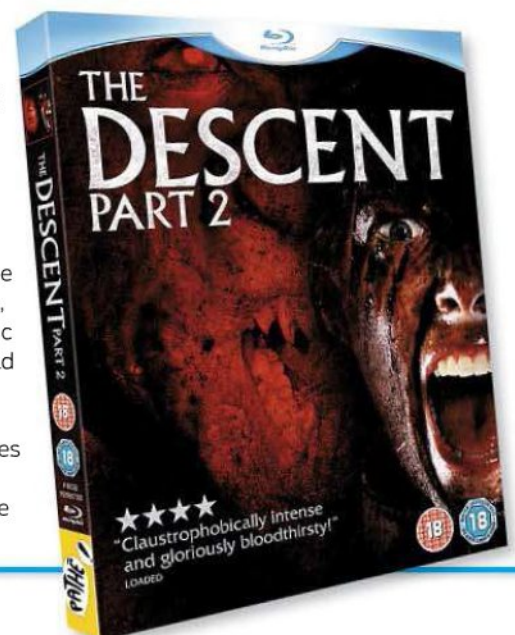
I've read your magazine for nearly 15 years now and have always valued your thoughts, opinions and test results when it comes to how I can get the best from my various surround systems over the years.

Anyway, I recently joined a well-known online forum site, to get some advice on scaling problems I had encountered with my projector, and found myself trawling through the various topic threads and advice comments concerning the replay of high-definition material in British home cinemas. And I was stunned to find that this particular site is in the grip of what you've described as 'a ridiculous situation whereby consumers [are] expecting hi-def movies to ignore the director's artistic

visions in favour of a pin-sharp HD image'.

I may have paraphrased what was actually said, but I was amazed at the blatant snobbery and down right ignorant approach to 21st-century home cinema! The best example was provided by one of this site's most prolific contributors, who, when replying to a young man who has recently bought into the world of home cinema, and needed some basic advice, decided it would be best to pound him into submission with details of sampling rates and transfer speeds based on the expensive kit the contributor had

built up. In the end, ten exchanges of comments later, the lad decided he would wait another year before completing his own simple bedroom install!



Sign up to HCC online!

Don't be an Alan Smithee! Joining *Home Cinema Choice's* online community is free, fast and fun

On the home page of www.homecinemachoice.com, scroll down the right-hand side of the page until you see the Login box. Click the *Join Here* button, choose a username and then create your profile. You can upload an image to represent you online and use your signature to tell fellow AV fans about your own system automatically every time you post. Joining the big AV debate online has never been easier!



months it's been replaced by the next best thing. The number of models can also be confusing.

That brings me back to Cambridge Audio, and your reviews section is scant to say the least – the last review was December 2007. I'm sure this is not deliberate but by not reviewing their products I believe it deprives readers of a British-derived alternative. I've recently bought Cambridge Audio's 650BD Blu-ray player and it deserves a review – for the money, it's sensational. Similarly specced decks by Denon or Marantz cost considerably more.

So please bear Cambridge Audio in mind as it's a brand

I put huge faith in.
Ian, via email

We're aware of the heritage of Cambridge Audio, but you're right, we haven't reviewed much of its kit recently. This is partly because CA doesn't churn out new products at the rate the Japanese majors do, and partly because we don't seem to have been at the top of its list for receiving review samples! However, all this seems to be changing as we have a 650BD winging its way to us, so look out for a review very soon.

OLED R.I.P.?

I really would like to have your

This was the most sad conclusion to what could well have been a revelatory experience for the young man concerned. Especially when you realise that all he wanted was simple wiring advice, not a seasoned AV vet bragging continually about the way he has thrown tens of thousands of quid at his own AV system in order to get the sound and vision he wanted.

I like the fact that you review and give unbiased opinions on both budget kit and high-end equipment – not just the kind of gear Spielberg and Lucas can afford to even look at, let alone buy. That rather haughty approach to home cinema has done nothing but highlight why those of us with this hobby are looked upon as nerdy fools, who relish giving data read-outs and techy solutions to very simple queries. If I'm wrong then I'm wrong, but try telling

that to the young lad who now believes he should wait until he can spend almost a year's wages on what should be his first home cinema.
mecinemman22 via email

We absolutely agree. We try never to forget that it's all about the fun you get out of your kit, not the amount of money you spend on it, or the stunning spec sheet. Today's AV-holic may well be tomorrow's pro-install client, but we'll continue to cover the whole range of AV kit from the most mass-market machines, to the dream systems most of us can only fantasise about!

Winner: Star Letter-writer *mecinemman22* wins a copy of *The Descent: Part 2* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Pathé Distribution Ltd. It's available to buy April 12, priced £25 approx.

take on the wimpy decision by Sony to stop all further production and research and involvement with OLED.

When I heard, I was gob-smacked – this technology is a beauty to behold... What is next?

Peter Ainslie, Southampton

As far as we know, Peter, Sony is continuing research and development in OLED, but has taken its 11in TV off the shelves. When we find out more we'll report it in *HCC*. Also, don't forget that LG is still pushing OLED screens, so the technology isn't dead yet.

Shoot the picture researcher...

As Delboy would say: what a plonker! On your letters pages in *HCC* #179 you used a picture of the wrong Pioneer screen. The screen you displayed is not the PDP-436SXE, but looks more like the 436XDE model (from the year before). As I'm a fellow Pioneer 436SXE owner, then I should know!

And another thing: even though I buy *HCC* every month on release date, I want to subscribe to save money, but the free offers have not interested me recently.
Neil, Stockport.

Well spotted Neil. In our defence, *HCC's* picture library extends back to the mid 1990s and it's quite easy to accidentally pick up the wrong one – especially when they have similar model numbers and our memories of the said product are fading away. But rest assured, the relevant *HCC* staffer has had his hands lashed with Scart cabling.

As for subscriptions, we've found that some readers are only interested in saving money off the cover price, whereas others like to receive a tangible gift. It's a hard balance to achieve, but we'll keep trying.

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SELECT

→ **Buying Guide** **BEST EVER LCD TV** The top performing LCD screens in the UK revealed **HI-DEF PLAYERS** Looking for a Blu-ray deck? We help you choose **PLASMA POWER** Your guide to the ultimate bigscreen TV **ROCKIN' RECEIVERS** The best specs and latest codecs **SUPREME SPEAKERS** Need a 5.1 package? We name the best! **PLUS** subwoofers, projectors, PVRs & more...

TOP
BUYER'S GUIDE
**All killer
no
filler**



HCC Ratings key

Officially awesome	1 2 3 4 5
Essential purchase	1 2 3 4 5
Does the job	1 2 3 4 5
Disappointing	1 2 3 4 5
Don't touch it	1 2 3 4 5

LCD TV

Best on test...



SONY
46in → KDL-46Z5800
£1,900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

First ever Bravia with a built-in Freesat HD tuner

Highs: Picture performance; 200Hz tech put to good use
Lows: CCFL-backlight; limited net interactivity

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and Freesat HD and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



PHILIPS
56in → Cinema 21:9
£4,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Groundbreaking ultra widescreen TV

Highs: Loaded with features; brings a genuine sense of cinema to your 2.35:1 films
Lows: Backlight a bit weak

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
2560 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 5
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 171
For more info visit:
www.philips.co.uk



SAMSUNG
40in → UE-40C7000
£1,800 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Debut 3DTV outstands in other areas, too

Highs: Next-gen tech; Freeview HD tuner; app store
Lows: Fiddly control system; 3D effect needs a bigger display

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Via HDMI only
Digital tuner: Yes (and Freeview HD, plus CI slot)

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



LG
42in → 42SL9000
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

LG's LED-lit 'Seamless' LCD offers excellent value for money

Highs: Exceptional pictures; ISF-certified calibrated controls
Lows: Black levels aren't A-list; 'Seamless' design isn't all that

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (to 1080p24)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



SHARP
52in → LC52LE700E
£1,900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Bigscreen LED LCD with calibration skills

Highs: Low power use; bright, involving pictures
Lows: Muted reds; poor off-axis viewing; average audio

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (to 1080p24)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (& CI slot)

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.sharp.co.uk

Also Recommended...



SONY
46in → KDL-46Z5500
£1,900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

2009 Z-Series builds upon previous Bravia know-how

Highs: Wonderfully detailed pictures; bright, crisp colours
Lows: Black levels are a tad light; poor off-axis viewing

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



SAMSUNG
32in → LE40B650
£700 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Look for good deals on this 2009-issue 40in LCD

Highs: Superb features; excellent all-round pics; design
Lows: Audio performance is pretty pathetic

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



TOSHIBA
46in → 46SV685DB
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Debut LED-backlit screen from Tosh is a real eye-opener

Highs: Excellent contrast and detail; good quality audio; multimedia talents
Lows: Not particularly stylish

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.toshiba.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

PHILIPS
46in → 46PFL9704
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

The second generation of Philips' LED-backlit LCD TV improves on its predecessor by adding 75 per cent more light emitting diodes, enabling far greater control over local dimming. And it shows – the 46PFL9704's black level response is startling, shadow detailing is first-rate, and colours are rich, vibrant yet subtle. HD pictures routinely left us flabbergasted. Elsewhere, this 46incher ticks all the boxes, with Philips' brilliant Net TV functionality, five HDMI inputs, solid SD upscaling and a gorgeous brushed aluminium finish.

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit: www.philips.co.uk



→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 5
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (and CI slot)

Plasma TV

Best on test...



PIONEER
60in → KRP-600A
£5,000 Approx



Kuro with separate media box, Ethernet and satellite tuner

Highs: Awesome black levels; colour accuracy; slim panel; media-savvy

Lows: Problems with AVI files

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 3 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus CI slot and DVB-S2 tuner)

Tested: Issue 164
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



PANASONIC
65in → TX-P65V10B
£4,500 Approx



Currently the biggest, bestest plasma you can buy

Highs: High-impact bigscreen pictures; Freesat HD

Lows: Lack of manual colour temp controls; sucks electricity

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus Freesat tuner and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



PANASONIC
50in → TX-P50V10B
£1,900 Approx



THX-certified, Viera Cast-touting NeoPDP

Highs: THX mode is stunning out of the box; good feature set

Lows: Unspectacular black level response; a bit chunky

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus Freesat tuner and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



PIONEER
50in → PDP-LX5090
£2,500 Approx



Baby brother of the LX6090 Kuro panel

Highs: Unbelievable contrast and black levels; superb detail

Lows: Speakers are an optional extra only

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 3
No. of Scart inputs: 3 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus CI slot)

Tested: Issue 159
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



LG
32in → 32PG6000
£500 Approx



World's smallest 32in plasma challenges LCD rivals

Highs: Smooth movement; good blacks and connectivity

Lows: Lack of detail; some jagged edges; average audio

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes
1024 x 720 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus analogue)

Tested: Issue 162
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk

Also Recommended...



LG
50in → 50PG6000
£1,100 Approx



Superb HD Ready plasma offering great value for money

Highs: Extensive calibration possibilities; excellent black level; sexy bezel

Lows: Not Full HD

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes
1366 x 768 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes (plus CI slot)

Tested: Issue 154
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



PANASONIC
42in → TX-P42G15
£850 Approx



Freesat HD NeoPDP at an enticing price

Highs: Wide viewing angle; excellent HD pics

Lows: Lacks brightness; three HDMI's only

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 3
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus Freesat HD and CI slot)

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



SAMSUNG
50in → PS50A556
£1,000 Approx



Bargain-priced monster screen with a few caveats

Highs: Superb specification; great build quality; sharp detail

Lows: Some motion artefacts and noise visible

→ Specifications

HD Ready: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 3
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (plus CI slot)

Tested: Issue 161
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

PANASONIC
46in → TX-P46Z1
£4,300 Approx



THX certification, full 1080p wireless transmission, ultra-thin design...

Panasonic's flagship plasma TV is a giant leap forward for the display technology. Add in the Freesat HD tuner, Viera Cast and DLNA networkability and stunning HD and SD pictures and you begin to understand the premium price tag. Some might argue that its black levels aren't as jaw-dropping as a Pioneer Kuro – but those screens aren't being made any more. The Z1 is simply the best plasma TV you can buy.

Tested: Issue 172
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Specifications

HD Ready: yes (up to 1080p/24)
Native resolution: 1920 x 1080
No. of HDMI inputs: 4 (v1.3)
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes (and Freesat)



Blu-ray Players

Best on test...



DENON
Blu-ray → DVD-A1UD
£4,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Reference universal Blu-ray player that sets new standards

Highs: Stunning life-like picture; genuine hi-fi sound; awesome DVD upscaling

Lows: Complex to set up; not for those on a budget!

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: Yes/Yes
Networkability: Yes, via Ethernet

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.denon.co.uk



SAMSUNG
Blu-ray → BD-P3600
£250 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Top-level Samsung BD spinner

Highs: Impressive pics and sound; 7.1-channel output; DivX HD playback

Lows: No WMA support; PC streaming tricky to set up; Wi-Fi requires dongle

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Ethernet, Wi-Fi via supplied dongle, USB

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



LG
Blu-ray → BD390
£290 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Improved players sports more features than BD370

Highs: Excellent performance; 1GB internal storage; Wi-Fi net connection, 7.1 analogue outputs

Lows: Audio can't match its premium BD rivals

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Yes, via Ethernet/Wi-Fi (including YouTube), USB

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



PANASONIC
Blu-ray → DMP-BD85
£300 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

New top-of-the line deck – until the 3D player arrives...

Highs: Overall picture and sound performance; 'Tube' sound emulator for CDs

Lows: Somewhat sluggish menus, Wi-Fi via dongle only

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Ethernet, Wi-Fi via dongle, VieraCast, SD card slot, 2 x USB

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



DENON
Blu-ray → DBP-1610
£400 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Affordable Denon deck benefits from brand's attention to detail

Highs: Good, natural-looking picture; quality audio performance; great value

Lows: No analogue outs; slow to load our test disc

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Ethernet, SD card slot for BD-Live

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.denon.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

SONY
Blu-ray → BDP-S760 → £380 Approx

1 2 3 4 5



Sony has a few Blu-ray decks now that are comfortably better than its PlayStation 3 console, and the keenly-priced S760 is our favourite. It incorporates the HD Reality Enhancer and Super Bit-Mapping picture-processing tech of its £1,200 BDP-S5000ES stablemate (albeit in a thinner chassis) and the results are startling – detailed, deep, colour-rich HD visuals and quality surround sound delivery. Some might miss the lack of esoteric codec support (no MKV here, folks) but that's not what this Sony is about – consider it a reference machine for the budget-conscious.

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit: www.sony.co.uk

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet; Wi-Fi; USB

Also Recommended



PIONEER
Blu-ray → BDP-LX52
£500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Stripped-down LX-branded player is a mid-range marvel

Highs: Class-leading picture and sound

Lows: Not simple to get to grips with; multichannel PQLS function only works on LPCM

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Yes via Ethernet; USB

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



PHILIPS
Blu-ray → BDP7300
£230 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Debut UK deck from Philips was worth the wait

Highs: Internal 1GB storage; multichannel analogue outputs; vivid, detailed image

Lows: Stylised 'curved' look not for everyone

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (5.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Yes via Ethernet; USB

Tested: Issue 175
For more info visit:
www.philips.co.uk



SONY
Blu-ray → BDP-S360
£190 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Affordable Sony Blu-ray is a real rival to its PS3

Highs: Stylish design and good AV performance; very solid construction

Lows: External memory required for BD-Live access

→ Specifications

Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Analogue audio output: Yes (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No
Networkability: Yes, via Ethernet

Tested: Issue 175
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk

Recorders

Best on test...



SONY
DVDR → RDR-HXD995
£250 Approx



Heavyweight Freeview+ unit with features galore

Highs: Excellent AV performance; flexible recording modes; multimedia prowess

Lows: Records 'interactive red dot'; possible aerial sensitivity

→ Specifications

HDD size: 250GB
Twin tuners: Yes, digital and analogue
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
Camcorder input: Yes
Format: -R/RW, +R/RW
Dual-layer recording: Yes

Tested: Issue 165
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



HUMAX
Freesat PVR → Foxsat HDR
£300 Approx



First Freesat HD PVR brings extra clout to fledgling system

Highs: Cinch to operate; good performance; ITV in HD; JPEG/MP3 playback

Lows: Annoying LCD; slow to boot up; needs more HD content!

→ Specifications

HDD size: 320GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freesat HD (satellite – requires dish)
HDMI: Yes
Component output: No
CI slot: Yes
Freeview+: No

Tested: Issue 165
For more info visit:
www.humaxdigital.com/uk



SAGEM
PVR → DTR67500T
£180 Approx



500GB Freeview+ PVR with USB archiving

Highs: Capacious HDD; flexible and intuitive EPG; picture quality is excellent

Lows: No way of importing recordings from other devices

→ Specifications

HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
CI slot: No
Freeview+: Yes

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.sagem.com/uk



LG
DVDR/3.1 → HRT403DA
£500 Approx



Convergence king offers 3.1 audio and HDD/DVD recording

Highs: Acceptable, punchy audio; well-specified recorder; quality DVD pictures

Lows: Lacks DTS support; no 5.1 upgrade path

→ Specifications

HDD size: 160GB
Twin tuners: Yes, digital and analogue
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
Camcorder input: Yes
Format: -R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

Tested: Issue 165
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



TOPFIELD
PVR → TF5810PVR
£350 Approx



Freeview+ PVR with enormous 500GB HDD

Highs: Easy to use; PC connectivity; upscales Freeview; twin tuners offer great flexibility

Lows: Competing with high-end DVD recorders

→ Specifications

HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
CI slot: Yes
Freeview+: Yes

Tested: Issue 156
For more info visit:
www.topfield.co.uk

Also recommended



PIONEER
DVDR → DVR-560HX
£400 Approx



Full PC-linked multimedia jukebox and DVD/HDD unit

Highs: Excellent AV performance and features spread; networkability

Lows: Jukebox abilities reliant on Windows Media Player

→ Specifications

HDD size: 160GB
Twin tuners: Yes, digital & analogue
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
Camcorder input: Yes
Format: -R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

Tested: Issue 159
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



PANASONIC
DVDR → DMR-EX79
£300 Approx



2009 DVD/HDD recorder improves slightly on the EX78

Highs: AV performance is first-rate; heaps of features and recording flexibility

Lows: No STB control; can't copy DivX/JPEG to HDD

→ Specifications

HDD size: 250GB
Twin tuners: No, 1 x digital only
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
Camcorder input: Yes
Format: -R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

Tested: Issue 169
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



HUMAX
PVR → PVR-9300T
£200 Approx



Souped-up Humax drops USB socket but boosts HDD capacity

Highs: Easy and responsive to use; fine AV performance; well-featured

Lows: Limited HDMI modes; no USB functionality

→ Specifications

HDD size: 320GB
Twin tuners: Yes
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
CI-slot: Yes
Digital tuner: Freeview
Freeview+: Yes

Tested: Issue 162
For more info visit:
www.humaxdigital.com/uk

Editor's Choice...

PANASONIC
DVD/BDR → DMR-BS850 → £1,000 Approx



With its 500GB HDD, twin Freesat HD tuners, profile 2.0 Blu-ray player/recorder and Viera Cast online interactivity, this Panasonic deck is clearly the king of convergence. As a BD-spinner it's solid, sharing the gizzards of the brand's DMP-BD60, and as a PVR it's simply brilliant, with the mix of hard disc and Blu-ray drive allowing for all sorts of archiving and editing possibilities. The USB, firewire and SD inputs – and in-built Gracenote database – add even more flexibility.

Tested: Issue 170
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Specifications

Hard disk: 500GB
Twin Tuners: Yes 2 x Freesat HD
Component output: Yes (progressive)
Freeview+: No, it's Freesat
Format: BD-RE, BD-R, DVD-R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

AV Receivers

Best on test...



PIONEER
AVR → SC-LX82
£1,900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

ICE-powered AIR Studios-tuned AVR replaces the SC-LX81

Highs: Punchy, highly detailed sound; brilliant features; looks fabulous; solid build

Lows: Pioneer doesn't do height/width processing

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 190W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: THX Ultra2 Plus
Component input: 3
HDMI: 5-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 175
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



YAMAHA
AVR → RX-V2065
£850 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

New-look Yamaha receiver is a great sub-£1K all-rounder

Highs: Superb networking prowess; wonderful natural sound that suits all material

Lows: GUI takes some getting used to

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 130W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 2
HDMI: 5-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.yamaha.co.uk



ONKYO
AVR → TX-NR5007
£2,200 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

9.2-channel HD receiver with exhaustive features and power

Highs: First-class home cinema performance; processing allows 9-channel height/width audio

Lows: No proprietary anti-jitter tech, Wi-Fi or secondary remote

→ Specifications

Power: 9 x 220W (6Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: Yes, Ultra2 Plus
Component input: 3
HDMI: 8-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.eu.onkyo.com



DENON
AVR → AVR-4810
£2,800 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Denon's top-of-the-line AVR makes all kinds of speaker configurations possible

Highs: Audyssey DSX 11-channel capable; rich, powerful sound; feature-packed

Lows: No THX certification

→ Specifications

Power: 9 x 140W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (FM/AM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3 & 4
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 6-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.denon.co.uk



SONY
AVR → STR-DH800
£350 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Slick, flexible bargain model with provision for wireless multiroom audio

Highs: Superb value; big and smooth sound; easy to use

Lows: No video upscaling or multichannel inputs

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 85W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: No
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: No, unless you use S-Air wireless speakers
Serial port control: No
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 4-in, 1-out
Multichannel input: No

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

ARCAM
AVR → AVR600
£3,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5



British manufacturer Arcam arrived late to the HD audio party, but the AVR600 is certainly worth the wait. Utilising a Class G analogue amplifier, this silver machine is cool-running and efficient, while an entire 'root and branch' overhaul of multichannel AV amp design has allowed Arcam to tackle audio jitter head on. Yet this isn't purely an audiophile product – it's packed with custom install features, offers an insane array of connections, and delivers Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD MA Blu-ray mixes with aplomb. A class act from a classic brand.

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit: www.arcam.co.uk

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 120W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: DAB/AM/FM
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: Yes/Yes
Zone 2: Yes and Zone 3
Serial port control: Yes, 2
THX certification: No
Component input: 5
HDMI: 5-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Also Recommended...



NAD
AVR → T747
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Excellent AVR offers more grunt than its specs suggest

Highs: Storming all-round performance; eases you into every film; simple to use

Lows: No Ethernet or USB inputs; DAB costs extra

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 60W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 4-in, 1-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit:
www.nadelectronics.com



ONKYO
AVR → TX-NR807
£800 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Powerful and potent height/width processor at a great price

Highs: Full-on gung-ho sound with massive bass; DSX/DPLIIz processing; excellent upscaling

Lows: Slightly flimsy build; no USB or multichannel inputs

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 180W (6Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: Select2 Plus
Component input: 2
HDMI: 6-in, 1-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: No

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.eu.onkyo.com



DENON
AVR → AVR-4310
£1,900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Audyssey DSX-toting AVR will change the way you think about speaker placement

Highs: Awesome sound as standard; extra width and height channels are a boon

Lows: Lacks the 9.1 DSX option

→ Specifications

Power: 7 x 130W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 6-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.denon.co.uk

Projectors

Best on test...



SIM2
DLP → Grand Cinema
C3X 1080
£23,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Reference-status PJ with brilliant colour management

Highs: Gorgeous design; small form factor; dazzling pictures

Lows: SD processing isn't quite hi-end enough for the price

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): NA
Contrast (claimed): 10,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 2,000 hours
Fan noise: NA
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 169
For more info visit:
www.sim2.co.uk



VIVITEK
DLP → H1085
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

A brilliant Full HD projector at a mouth-watering price

Highs: Rich colours; excellent image tweaks; 12V trigger

Lows: Noisy runner in high brightness mode; some low-level noise in darker scenes

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 2,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 5,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000 hours
Fan noise: 26dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.vivitekcorp.com



SONY
SXR → VPL-VW85
£5,400 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Successor the VW80 delivers a truly cinematic picture

Highs: Astonishing contrast and detail levels; plenty of picture tweaks

Lows: MotionFlow tech is best left unused

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 800 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 120,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 3,000 hours
Fan noise: 20dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk/biz



OPTOMA
DLP → Themescene HD82
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

A tasty development of a distinguished product line

Highs: Good blacks levels; impressive colour performance; easy to set up

Lows: Some dynamic iris noise; some DLP rainbow effect

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,300 ANSI Lumens
Contrast (claimed): 20,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 3,000 hours
Fan noise: 26dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.optoma.co.uk



PANASONIC
LCD → PT-AE4000
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Updated flagship PJ adds red-rich lamp and 12V trigger

Highs: Smooth filmic pictures; easy to setup and use; handy feature set

Lows: Boxy design; be careful with high frame-rate settings

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,600 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 100,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 2,000 hours
Fan noise: 22dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk

Also Recommended...



BENQ
DLP → W1000
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

A £1K Full HD projector with good colour presets

Highs: Very sharp HD pictures; alluring tactile finish; plenty of fine-tuning options

Lows: Rainbow effect; noticeable fan noise

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 2,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 3,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000 hours
Fan noise: 27dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
benq.co.uk



OPTOMA
DLP → HD20
£900 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Wallet-friendly model is an ideal first projector

Highs: Excellent detail resolution; reasonable contrast and brightness

Lows: Some fan noise; rainbow effect; limited throw distance

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,700 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 500:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000 hours
Fan noise: 29dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.optoma.co.uk



VIVITEK
DLP → H9080FD
£10,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

The world's first 'lampless' LED projector

Highs: Excellent colour fidelity; great definition; long lifespan

Lows: Lacks brightness; early adopters pay for the innovative LED tech

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: No, use HDMI instead for PC hookup
Brightness (claimed): 1,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 15,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000 hours
Fan noise: NA
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.vivitekcorp.com

Editor's Choice...

JVC
D-ILA → HD950
£6,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5



Put simply, JVC's new video-chucker is capable of an awe-inspiring performance. Spin up a Blu-ray and you'll be rewarded with three-dimensional, natural-looking pictures that are packed with detail, shadow subtlety and vibrant colours. Setting up the HD950 is made easy by its fully-motorised optical adjustments, and a THX-certified colour preset for those not wanting to get their hands dirty in its extensive calibration menus. It's an almost silent runner, too. The best PJ we've yet seen at this price point.

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit: www.jvc.co.uk

→ Specifications

1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 900 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 50,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 3,000 hours
Fan noise: 19dB
24fps: Yes

Speaker Systems

Best on test...



BOSTON ACOUSTICS
5.1 → VS Series
£5,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Gorgeous-looking, hi-tech 5.1 system for serious cinema

Highs: Enormous sound; scintillating HF performance

Lows: Subwoofer feels underpowered compared to surrounds

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 2 x 400, 3 x 250W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 1 x 500W
Finish: Wood; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.bostonacoustics.com



PIONEER
5.1 → EX Series
£11,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

A stunning 5.1 system to match the brand's high-quality components

Highs: Breathtaking accuracy; beautiful imagery and detail; sexy design and solid build

Lows: Demands specific room placement

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 5 x 160W,
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 250W
Finish: Gloss; Bookshelf:
Rears (at a stretch...)

Tested: Issue 170
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



MONITOR AUDIO
5.1 → Vector
£650 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

5.1 sub/sat system ideal for a small room home cinema

Highs: Easy to wall-mount; rugged build quality; thrilling surround sound performance

Lows: Subwoofer is punchy and fast, but lacks depth

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 5 x 80W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 100W
Finish: Matt; Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.monitoraudio.com



BOWERS & WILKINS
5.1 → CM Series
£4,250 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Top quality 5.1 array in a classical wood finish

Highs: True sweet highs from hi-tech tweeters; brilliant 10in woofer; solid construction

Lows: Square-edge design not exactly high-end

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 3 x 200W, 2 x 120W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 500W
Finish: Wood; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.bowers-wilkins.com



KLIPSCH
5.1 → Icon system
£2,700 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Sleek-looking US-made system with horn technology

Highs: High-quality audio; excellent value for money;

clever, simple-to-use subwoofer
Lows: Not suited to largescale home cinema rooms

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 2 x 125W, 2 x 75W, 1 x 100
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 300W
Finish: Gloss; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.klipsch.co.uk

Also Recommended...



JAMO
5.1 → A 102 HCS 5
£330 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Good-value 5.1 system with living-room-friendly size/looks

Highs: Relaxed, intelligible dialogue presentation; available online for as little as £200

Lows: Subwoofer lacks real subterranean power; small satellites lend a rawness to the audio

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 5 x 60W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 200W
Finish: Cherry; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 170
For more info visit:
www.jamo.com



WHARFEDALE
5.1 → Diamond 10 HCP
£650 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Sub/sat system mixes hi-fi roots with a 10in woofer

Highs: Powerful subwoofer; exciting treble; highly musical

Lows: A little bright at high volume; might not be visceral enough for action movie fans

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 4 x 75W,
1 x 120W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 150W
Finish: Wood; Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.wharfedale.co.uk



FOCAL JMLAB
5.1 → Dome
£1,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Stylish 5.1 sub/sat system with remarkable voice

Highs: Bold, full and detailed sound quality for music and home cinema; gorgeous design

Lows: Large cabinets offer more presence; bit pricey

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 5 x 100W,
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 100W
Finish: Aluminium; red, black, white; Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.focal-uk.com

Editor's Choice...

KEF
5.1 → XQ Series
£5,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

This KEF 5.1 array mixes standmount surrounds with two hulking floorstanders to deliver a massive cinematic audio

experience that's hard to fault – an ideal blend of deep bass, spacious mid-band and crystal clear treble. The design is gorgeous, too – another KEF masterclass in gloss black cabinets (curved to reduce internal reflections) and clearly taking a lead from the brand's awe-inspiring Reference system. Other variants of the speakers are available, so you can spec a more affordable, smaller-room setup should you wish.

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit: www.kef.com/gb

→ **Specifications**

Power handling: 2 x 200W, 2 x 120W, 1 x 150W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 1 x 200W
Finish: Gloss
Bookshelf: No chance

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Subwoofers

Best on test...



NAIM
SW → n-Sub
£1,600 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Class AB amp-driven premium-level subwoofer

Highs: Rich, textured bass with tight control; innovative features
Lows: High-end rivals have a bit more grunt to 'em

→ Specifications

Frequency response: 2-Hz-250Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 350W
Driver: 12in
Weight: 29.6kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: Yes

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.naim-audio.com



MARTINLOGAN
SW → Descent i
£3,250 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Weapons-grade unit with 3 x 10in woofers

Highs: Superb engineering; Reference standard performance
Lows: Bulky and premium-priced; no automated setup

→ Specifications

Frequency response: 18Hz-120Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 500W
Driver: 3 x 10in
Weight: 47.7kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: No
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 167
For more info visit:
www.martinlogan.com



BOWERS & WILKINS
SW → ASW608
£300 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Compact subwoofer ideal for smaller rooms

Highs: Excellent grip and musical low-end control
Lows: Limited by its size

→ Specifications

Frequency response: 23Hz-140Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 200W
Driver: 8in
Weight: 8.85kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 160
For more info visit:
www.bowers-wilkins.com



TANNOY
SW → TS1201
£600 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

12in sub with simultaneous LFE and speaker level inputs

Highs: Smart looks; easy of use; real weight and presence
Lows: Remote control will cost you extra

→ Specifications

Frequency response: Down to 21Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 500W
Driver: 12in
Weight: 16.7kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.tannoy.com



VELODYNE
SW → SPL-1200 Ultra
From £1,400 Approx

1 2 3 4 5

Potent sub – now with custom finish options

Highs: Tight, powerful bass; useful auto-calibration
Lows: Few added benefits over the step-down model

→ Specifications

Frequency response: 21-120Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 1,200W
Driver: 12in
Weight: 22kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: Yes

Tested: Issue 172
For more info visit:
www.velodyne.com

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